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Title: *The Iron Boys in the Mines; or, Starting at the Bottom of the Shaft*

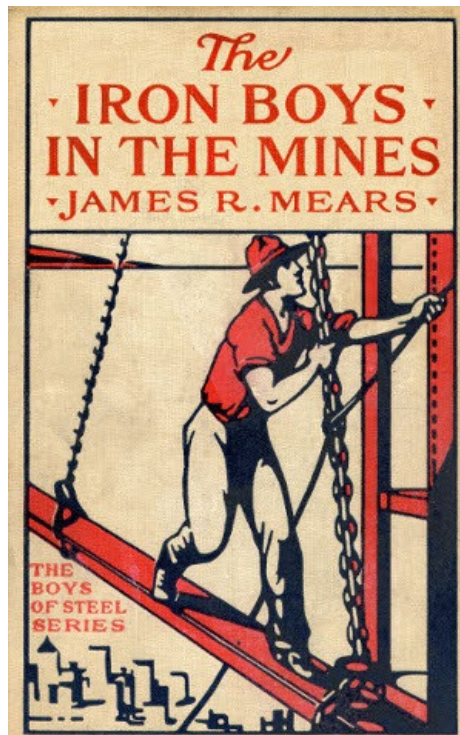
Author: James R. Mears

Release date: March 9, 2012 [EBook #39083]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Dianna Adair, Stephen Hutcheson, Rod Crawford,
Dave Morgan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team
at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK *THE IRON BOYS IN THE MINES; OR,
STARTING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SHAFT* ***





Steve Gazed With Wonder Upon the Busy Scene.
Frontispiece.

The Iron Boys in the Mines

OR

Starting at the Bottom of the Shaft

By

JAMES R. MEARS

Author of

The Iron Boys As Foremen,

The Iron Boys on the Ore Boats,

etc.

Illustrated

PHILADELPHIA

HENRY ALTEMUS COMPANY

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The Iron Boys in the Mines

CHAPTER I

[7]

SECURING A JOB UNDER DIFFICULTIES

"Is Mr. Carrhart in?"

"Maybe he is, and maybe he isn't," answered the office boy, grinning sardonically. "Who are you?"

"My name is Stephen Rush and I wish to see Mr. Carrhart, the president of the mining company," answered the first speaker, a lad of some sixteen years, dark-haired, dark-eyed and slight of build.

"What do you want to see him about?"

"That is what I have come to tell him," replied young Rush, directing a level gaze at the boy, who was half a head taller and much more stocky of build than was Steve. "May I speak with the president?"

"No; you may not speak with Mr. Carrhart."

"Why not, please? It is quite important."

"Because I won't let you."

"You won't let me?"

[8]

"No."

"Will you not take my name in—tell him I shall not detain him?"

"No!"

For a moment Steve Rush stood looking at the office boy, undecided and disappointed. He had not thought there would be any difficulty in getting a few words with the man he had come to see.

"Go on—skip!"

The office boy, without giving the caller an opportunity to obey his command, sprang forward, and, pressing both hands against Steve's chest, began shoving the lad out into the corridor. Steve was stepping backwards so fast that he was unable to free himself from the belligerent office boy.

All at once young Rush took advantage of a momentary pause of his antagonist, and sprang lightly to one side. The next instant his fingers closed over the wrists of the office boy, shutting down with a grip that made the other writhe.

"Leggo my hands!"

The office boy shook himself free, then swung a vicious blow at Steve's head. To the former's surprise his blow landed on thin air, but ere he could square himself for another swing the grip of young Rush had once more fastened on his wrists. And this time there was no breaking away. Tighter and tighter grew the pressure on the office boy's wrists. [9]

"Leggo! O-u-c-h! Leggo, I tell you!" cried the latter, raising his voice so high that office doors were quickly opened along the corridor, heads popping out, their owners demanding to know what the uproar was about.

"Will you take my name in to Mr. Carrhart?" demanded Steve in a low, firm tone.

"No, I won't. I'll trim you for this. I'll——"

Steve, with a strength that would not have been believed of him, calmly began leading his prisoner back into the office.

"Young man, I think I shall take you to Mr. Carrhart. We shall see what he has to say about you. I do not believe he will be pleased when I tell him how you have acted. I——"

Just then a door opened and a young man stepped out.

"Here, here, here, what does this mean?" demanded the newcomer sharply.

"He's hurting me; he's——"

Steve quickly released the hands of the office boy, and removing his hat, stepped forward respectfully.

"Are you Mr. Carrhart, sir?"

"No; I'm his secretary. What is the meaning of this disturbance?"

"I was trying to see Mr. Carrhart——"

"You have a most peculiar way of going about it, I must say," was the sharp reply. "What did you wish to see him about?" [10]

"I want to get a job."

"At what?"

"Anything—preferably in the mines."

The secretary laughed.

"I am sorry, young man, but the president is a very busy man. And besides, this is not the place to come for a situation in the mines. You will have to apply to one of the superintendents at the mines. However, I believe you are too young and——"

"But I am quite strong, sir. I am sure I shall be able to do a day's work. I am anxious——"

"You will have to apply as I have just suggested. You cannot see the president," announced the secretary shortly, turning on his heel and reëntering his own office.

"Yah, yah!" jeered the office boy. "Now, Mr. Smarty, will you get out or shall I put you out?"

"Neither."

"What's that?"

"You will not put me out, and I propose to remain here until I get a chance to see your employer," announced Steve in a low, firm tone. He calmly seated himself on a bench just outside the door of the office reception room.

The office boy's eyes narrowed angrily. He took a step toward Rush, then, apparently thinking [11]

better of it, strode back to his little square desk and threw himself into a chair, where he sat glowering at the calm-eyed boy out in the corridor.

Steve sat gazing steadily at the door of a room on which was written the word "President." Now and then he caught sight of a shadow within, through the ground-glass partition, and now and again the sound of voices reached him.

"Are you going to move?" demanded a voice at his side.

Steve glanced up, finding the office boy standing close to him, a threatening scowl on his face.

"I told you I was waiting to see the president."

"You are, eh?"

"Yes."

"How are you going to see him?"

"I am going to wait here until he comes out."

"If you don't get put out before that."

"Then I shall wait out in the lobby by the elevator. You can't put me out, for I am not in your office."

With a grunt the office boy returned to his desk. At about that time Rush caught sight of the figure of a man behind the glass of the door leading into the president's room. The lad was all attention at once. [12]

After a moment the door swung open and a man stepped out into the corridor and started for the elevator.

"I beg pardon, sir, are you Mr. Carrhart?" questioned Steve.

"Mr. Carrhart?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, no, my lad; what made you think I was?"

"I beg your pardon, sir. I saw you come out of the president's office and I wanted to see him very much," stammered the lad.

"Then why don't you go to see him?"

"I'm going to," answered Steve in a resolute tone. "Thank you, sir."

With that the lad turned, walking rapidly back. He did not stop when he had reached the bench just outside the reception room. Instead, he stepped firmly up to the door of the president's office. His hand was upon the door knob.

"Here, you, where you going?" cried the office boy, bounding after him.

Steve made no reply, whereupon the office boy started for him again. But the latter was not quick enough. Rush opened the door to the private office and stepped within. The office boy prevented his closing the door, and a second later had bolted in after the visitor. Then things began to happen with surprising quickness. Rush went down in a heap, the office boy landing on his back. Over and over the two lads rolled, clasped in a tight embrace. [13]

"Here, here! What does this mean?" demanded the president, gazing with amazement at the rough-and-tumble battle going on at his very feet.

Neither lad appeared to have heard him, for the rolling and floundering continued a few seconds longer. All at once Steve got a firm grip on the wrist of his antagonist. The office boy uttered a yell as the wrist was bent backwards. Rush swung him over on his face and sat down on him somewhat out of breath.

"Is this—is this Mr. Carrhart, sir?" stammered Steve.

"It is. But may I inquire what this remarkable performance means?"

"I came to see you, sir."

"You go about it in a very peculiar manner. Get up!"

"I can't, sir; the boy will want to fight me again."

"I will attend to the boy. Get up at once!"

Rush rose to his feet. As he had predicted, the office boy made another dash for him, but this Steve avoided by stepping to one side.

"Oscar, that will do!" said Mr. Carrhart sternly. "You have done your duty as you saw it. You may leave the room." [14]

The office boy obeyed, casting an angry glance at the unruffled countenance of Steve Rush as he

closed the door behind him.

"Now, what is it you want, young man?" questioned the president. "State your business briefly, for I have no time to waste."

"I am looking for a position, sir."

Mr. Carrhart was about to make a sharp reply, when, chancing to glance into the face of the lad before him, he saw something there that arrested the words he was about to utter. The boy's face showed an earnestness of purpose, a stubborn determination that led the mining president to modify his tone.

"You wish a position?" he asked not unkindly.

"Yes, sir."

"What position are you looking for?"

"I wish to go into the iron mines; I wish to learn the business, sir. I am stronger than I look—"

"Yes, I have just had evidence of that fact. But why do you come to me?"

"Because you are the head of the mines. Should I not go to the head when I am looking for a position?"

"Perhaps you are right at that, my lad. What is your name?"

[15]

Steve gave his name and his age, also adding that he had completed half his course at the high school in Duluth.

"Why did you not continue with your school? You should be in school at your age, rather than going to work."

"I should like to be, sir, but circumstances have arisen that make it necessary for me to go to work."

"What are those circumstances?"

"My father died four weeks ago, and I must work to help support my mother," answered the lad, a slight flush suffusing his cheeks.

"Does your mother work?"

"She is not able to take a position, sir. She does some sewing, and, with what I shall be able to earn in a little while, we shall get along very nicely."

"Hm-m-m!" mused the president. "You are very confident."

"Yes, sir. Because I am willing to work."

"Have you tried to get a position in town? I should think that would be better for a lad of your age than to work in the mines."

"No, sir; I have always wanted to be a miner. I want to start at the bottom and learn the business."

"I am afraid you could not stand it, my lad," answered Mr. Carrhart after brief reflection. "And, besides, as you understand, all the hiring is done by the officials at the mines."

[16]

"Yes, sir. But you need have no fear that I shall not be able to do a man's work. I was one of the best athletes in the high school. I was quite frail when I began going to school, but by systematic exercise I have built myself up. I can stand a much greater strain than you would imagine to look at me. If I do not make good they will not keep me. Won't you please give me a chance to try, sir?"

"How would you like to come in the office here?"

"I should like it, of course, sir; but, as I have already said, I prefer to begin at the bottom and work up."

"My lad, you are of the right stuff. You will get on in the world. Not much of anything matters in the face of such determination as yours. The work in the mines is very hard. You will find rough men there and you will meet with more or less temptation, but I believe you are strong enough to keep yourself above it."

"Yes, sir. I am sure of that, sir."

By this time Mr. Carrhart was busily writing. Steve watched him, not quite certain whether or not the interview was at an end.

"You—you will give me a chance, sir?" asked the lad after a moment's silence.

[17]

"Yes; here is a letter to the general superintendent of the Cousin Jack Mine. I have asked him to give you employment at the earliest possible moment. I shall hope to hear good reports from you, Rush. Remember what I have said to you. I shall keep an eye on you."

"Oh, thank you, sir; thank you! I cannot tell you how I appreciate your kindness."

"Purely a matter of business, my lad. I see in you the making of an excellent man for the company. We are looking for young men with your determination and grit."

As Steve passed out through the reception room the office boy stepped in front of him.

"I'll lick you the first time I catch you outside," announced the guardian of the door.

"Please don't," answered Steve. "Somebody might get hurt. Besides, I am not a fighter. Good afternoon."

Rush hurried out to carry the good news to his mother.

"That boy has the making of a great man," mused Carrhart, as he stood with hands clasped behind his back, gazing down into the street. "Yes, he will be heard from some of these days, unless I am greatly in error."

CHAPTER II

[18]

HANDLING THE RED ORE

"WHY, boy, you couldn't stand up for an hour down below ground."

Ike Penton, general superintendent of the Cousin Jack Mine, smiled indulgently into the eager face of Steve Rush.

"It's a man's work, not a boy's work. Mr. Carrhart's letter gives you a fine endorsement. He seems to think you have the making of a miner in you, and acting on his judgment, I shall of course give you a chance."

"Thank you, sir. You will try to place me down in one of the mines, will you not?"

"No; I shall not take the responsibility of doing so just at the present moment. I shall use you above ground for a few days, until I see what you are best fitted to do, and then—but mind you, I am not making any promises—I will see what can be done for you."

The superintendent smiled indulgently. He was a man of kindly impulses and he had boys of his own. Then, too, he remembered the day, many years before, when he, also, had sought employment in the iron mines. By sheer pluck he had worked his way up from the ranks, until now he was the head of an army of more than five thousand men, distributed among the various mines.

[19]

"Yes, I will see what can be done for you," repeated the superintendent.

"Thank you, sir; but I wish you might find a place for me down in the mines."

"Why are you so anxious to get below ground, my lad?"

"So that I may begin my apprenticeship at once."

"When will you be ready to go to work?"

"I am ready now," answered Steve promptly.

"The day is well along. Report here at seven o'clock to-morrow morning, and I will place you at something. Your pay, to begin, will be a dollar a day. Here is the address of a boarding house that I should advise you to put up at, unless you already have made arrangements."

"No, sir."

"Very well. Report to the boarding house boss some time to-day and he will see that you are taken care of. There are very good boys there, and you will learn considerable about the business of mining from them. Let me advise you, however, not to mix in too much with the foreign element. Let them alone and you will find they will do the same with you. Pay strict attention to duty, be punctual and work, and you will get along. Our discipline is strict, but we have the interests of our men at heart. In so far as they will let us, we make their well-being our first care. Here is a copy of the rules governing the conduct of men in all departments. Study it well to-day and come back here to-morrow morning at the hour named."

[20]

Briefly thanking the superintendent, Steve left the mine office at Iron Mountain and proceeded to the boarding house. There he was assigned to a room in which were cots for two men. The place was neat and clean, though extremely plain. There were no evidences of luxury in the furnishings, and when he sat down to his first meal there he found the food plain but wholesome; the miners mostly silent and in a great hurry to have done with their meal. Considering how they bolted their food, Steve did not understand how any of them managed to keep out of the hospital.

"It's a wonder they don't all have chronic indigestion," he thought.

No one paid any attention to the quiet youth, after the first careless glance at him, as the men took their places at the table. The lad did not care particularly. He was rather glad that they did leave him wholly to himself until he should become better acquainted with his surroundings.

What Steve was curious about, however, was who his roommate was to be. When he asked the boarding house boss about this the boy was told to wait until night, when he would see for himself. After that Steve asked no more questions. [21]

After dinner young Rush went out to wander about and get acquainted with his surroundings. Iron Mountain, the town in which was located the mine where he was to work, was a village of about seventeen hundred inhabitants, nestling between two high ranges of mountains. The timber had been cut off, and wherever the eye chanced to rest it was met by a forest of black stumps, with here and there the shaft of an iron mine rising dark and gloomy.

It was the most cheerless scene that Steve Rush had ever gazed upon. The buildings in the village proper were mostly mere shacks, the public school being the only building worthy of a name in the entire community.

The streets of the town were deserted, but beneath them, far down in the earth, men toiled and burrowed by day and by night, penetrating deeper and deeper into the earth in their quest for Nature's riches.

The lad was lonely. He would have been homesick had he not been possessed of the grit to keep his emotions in check. But as he strolled over toward the towering, gloomy mine shafts he began to realize that he was at the very fountain head of the greatest steel industry in the world. From the quiet of the little mining village he had come upon a scene of work the like of which he had never seen before. [22]

As he gazed, the great ore cars shot up from the mines with a roar. Leaping to the top of the high shaft, they hurled their cargoes of red ore into waiting dump cars, then dropped back below ground with a speed almost too great for the human eye to follow. Men red with the metal they were handling were laboring on the surface, their faces streaked with perspiration, their rolled-up sleeves and open-necked shirts displaying the brawn and muscle without which the great steel company would quickly lose its greatness.

Shrieking railroad engines were dashing into the yards, dragging from them loads of ore that would be rushed to waiting ore boats on the Great Lakes, to be conveyed thence to the great steel mills in the east. The cars were being loaded by machinery and with such speed as to cause the watcher to gasp with amazement.

"This is wonderful," Steve cried, carried away by his enthusiasm. "This is the life for me! I never dreamed it was so splendid."

It was, indeed, a world pulsating with opportunities for him who possessed the pluck to fight his way to the front. In a vague sort of way, Steve Rush seemed to realize this. [23]

"Some day I shall be at the head of one of these great industries!" he breathed. "I, too, will be a captain of industry! I'll never give up until I am—until I have learned all that can be learned about this wonderful industry."

The afternoon drew to a close all too soon for Steve, and not until the whistle blew at six o'clock and the miners in their oilskins came streaming up from their underground haunts, did the lad make up his mind to leave. With a sigh, he turned away, starting thoughtfully for the boarding house.

Just before sitting down to supper he was introduced to a Cornishman, who, he was told, was to be his roommate. When Steve had taken his place at the table he found himself sitting opposite a boy whom he judged to be about his own age. This boy, however, was taller and much more rugged looking than was Steve.

The latter saw the lad eyeing him inquiringly.

"What's your name, boy?" finally demanded the larger of the two, pointing a spoon at Steve.

"Stephen Rush."

"Rush?"

"Yes."

"That's a funny name. Do you hear that, fellows?"

"I do not see anything so very funny about it," replied Steve, his face flushing ever so little. "What is your name?" [24]

"Mine? I'm Bob Jarvis. But, judging from your name, you must be one of those fellows who is always in a hurry. Does your mamma know you're here?"

"She does," answered Steve gravely.

"Is she a Rusher, too?"

"Her name is Rush, if that is what you mean."

"Well, what do you think of that? His mother's Rush and she's a Rusher, too. That must be a pretty lively family," scoffed Jarvis. "Why, I'll bet—"

"You will please leave my mother's name out of your talk," commanded Steve quietly, directing a level gaze at Jarvis.

"Touchy, eh? Do you hear that, fellows?"

If the miners did hear they were much too busy with their suppers to give the matter much attention.

"Little Miss Hurry-up is going to get in a huff. But never mind, Rusher, I guess you're right at that. I had a mother once myself, but that don't stop me from saying whatever I want to you."

"Say what you wish to, so long as you confine your talk to myself," replied Steve. "What you say about me doesn't matter much, anyway. For that matter, I do not think your remarks are of very great consequence, whatever subject you may be discussing." [25]

"What's that?"

"I think you heard what I said."

"What do you mean, young fellow?"

"If you don't understand, I shall try to make it plainer. I mean to say that you act like a rowdy. I shouldn't be surprised if you are one."

Bob Jarvis half rose from his chair. The smile had left his face, giving place to an angry scowl.

"So, you—you are looking for fight, eh?" he demanded, thrusting his chin forward belligerently.

"No, sir; I am not." Steve did not even look up as he made the reply, but calmly proceeded with his supper.

"Well, you've got to fight, whether you are looking for it or not. I'll show you that you can't hand out a line of talk like that to Bob Jarvis," growled the larger boy, starting for the head of the table, around which he would have to go to reach Steve.

"Stow your scrapping and give us a chance to eat our suppers," growled one of the miners.

"Yes, we'll throw both of you out first thing you know," added another. "If you want to fight, why don't you have it out before you come to the table?" [26]

Jarvis gave no heed to the warnings. He was bent on punishing the boy on the other side of the table who had defied him. Just as he was passing the head of the table, a heavy hand gripped his collar, sending Bob spinning back toward his seat.

"Sit down!" bellowed a voice.

The boarding boss straightened up threateningly. It was he who had checked the pugnacious Bob Jarvis, and just in time to prevent a lively fight in the miners' boarding house. Bob fell rather than sat down in his chair.

"If you want to fight, go out doors. But if you do fight, I'll report you both to the superintendent," warned the boss, resuming his seat.

Bob sulked in his chair, while Steve Rush, appearing to take not the least bit of interest in the disturbance, went on with his supper unmoved.

"I'll make you take that back when I catch you outside, one of these fine days, Miss Hurry-up," threatened Bob in a low tone, leaning over the table with one eye on the boarding house boss.

"Yes?"

"Yes, I will. I dare you to meet me over by the dry house after supper. I promise you I will take it out of your hide." [27]

"No, thank you," replied Steve dryly, with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"You won't?"

"No, I will not."

"Afraid, eh?"

"Yes; afraid I might lose some sleep. I am going to bed after supper. I have work on hand tomorrow and I don't care to spoil my chances by getting into a row to-night. Besides, I am not a fighter. I am here for business."

"Fellows, I told you he was a missie. I see I've got to take you in hand, Rush. You'll never make a miner until you've been properly trimmed, and I'm the boy who's taken the contract to do the job. I—"

"Jarvis, that will be about enough for the present," warned the boarding house boss from the head of the table.

"Can't a fellow have a little fun without being called down?" demanded Bob in a tone of disgust.

"Yes; have all the fun you want, but don't pick on a boy who isn't your size. You, boy down there, what did you say your name is?"

"Stephen Rush."

"Well, Steve, don't be afraid of Jarvis. His bark is much worse than his bite."

"I am not afraid of him, sir."

[28]

"If he bothers you here, let me know. If you have any trouble outside, report it to the superintendent or to your foreman. Where are you going to work?"

"I don't know, sir. I have not been assigned. I thank you, but I think I shall be able to take care of myself without reporting to anyone," added Rush, flashing a significant glance at Bob Jarvis. The latter started to make some reply, but checked himself sharply.

From that time on the meal proceeded without further disturbance. Just as they were leaving the table, however, Jarvis edged over to where Steve was standing, waiting for those ahead of him to pass through the narrow door.

"I hope you get in my shift," he whispered in Steve's ear.

"Why?"

"Because I'll have a chance to teach you a few things."

"Then I hope I do," answered the lad in his soft voice. "I want to learn all I can, you know."

Bob's face wrinkled into a scowl. He was not certain whether Steve really meant what he said or whether he was poking fun at him.

Early on the following morning Steve reported to the office of the superintendent. To his disappointment he was assigned to the ore dump. This is a great pile of ore dumped on the surface by a tram car as the ore is brought up from the mine in a skip, or ore elevator. Steve's particular duty was to stand at the outer end of the track and shovel the ore away from the track after each carload had been dumped.

[29]

It was not a comfortable place to stand, for a misstep would precipitate him down the sloping end of the ore dump to the ground some forty feet below.

On this dump the ore car was pushed by hand, whereas on others it was operated by electricity. Steve had received his instructions from the dump boss, so, with a shovel in his hands, he stood awaiting the first carload of ore.

At last it came on with a bump and a crunch, groaning and threatening to jump the rails with each revolution of its wheels.

Steve sprang to one side as he saw the car approaching, believing for the minute that the tram was going to run him down and plunge over the end of the dump. Should such be the case, the tram would surely carry him down with it, so he had lost no time in getting out of the way.

"Hi, there! Look out where you are going! You'll run off the track!" shouted the lad in a warning tone.

But the tram did not run off. It came to a slow stop; then, instead of discharging its cargo over the end of the pile, the end of the car's box suddenly swung around toward Steve. There followed a quick, sharp, metallic clang. Steve Rush went down with the contents of the car falling all about him in a red, suffocating shower, burying him nearly to his neck. Some of the ore rolled down the side of the dump, and the lad would have followed had he not been held fast by the dirt about him. His body was bruised in spots where unbroken chunks had bombarded him; his hair, mouth, eyes and nose were full of the stuff, and he found himself scarcely able to breathe.

[30]

For a moment the boy was at a loss to understand what had happened. By industrious blinking and rubbing of his eyes he managed presently to take account of his surroundings.

Steve struggled with all his might to free himself. He was unable to do so.

"He—help!" he shouted. "I—I'm bu—buried up to my chin and I'm getting in deeper all the time. Help me to get out of this!"

"Hello, there! What's the matter?" questioned a jeering voice. "Why, upon my word, if it isn't Little Miss Rush."

Steve recognized the voice as belonging to Bob Jarvis.

"It's you, is it, Jarvis? Well, help me out of this and I will talk with you. I shall have a few things to say to you, too, when we get a chance to talk—"

[31]

"Why, sure, I'll help you out. How did you happen to get in the way of that dump?"

"Never mind how. I believe you did that on purpose, Bob Jarvis, and you will have to answer to me for it," declared Steve Rush in a resolute tone.

CHAPTER III

[32]

TWO THOUSAND FEET UNDER GROUND

JARVIS sprang forward and with shovel in hand began throwing the dirt in all directions.

"If you don't mind, please don't pile any more of this red stuff on my head than you can help. I have plenty as it is," said Steve.

"That's so; I was throwing it your way, wasn't I?" chuckled Bob, laughing good-naturedly.

Steve found time to study the other boy while the latter was digging him out. In spite of Jarvis' meanness to him, Rush felt certain that the lad possessed a good heart, and it was a strong, resourceful face that Steve found himself studying as the digging progressed.

"Bob," he said finally, "have you ever been thrashed?"

"Thrashed? Licked, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, not since my dad gave me a walloping last," laughed the boy.

"Don't you think a good, sound thrashing would do you a whole lot of good?"

Bob grinned broadly. By this time he had dug down around Rush until the latter was able to clamber from the pile of ore. [33]

"Well, I don't know about that."

"I do, and I know you've got to have one before very long," announced young Rush with strong emphasis.

"I will, eh?"

"You will," affirmed Steve, brushing the dirt from his clothes.

"And who's going to give me this licking, Little Miss Hurry-up?" demanded Jarvis threateningly.

"I am," replied Steve in a quiet tone.

Jarvis began to take off his coat.

"Not now, Bob," spoke up the other quickly. "This is the company's time. We should both be discharged if we were to be caught fighting here and now. We will settle our difficulty some other time."

"So you were only bluffing, eh? I knew you didn't have the spunk to fight anything."

Steve pointed off to the mine shaft.

"There comes the skip with a load of ore. You had better get your car back there or you will have trouble enough without a fight."

Jarvis, with an exclamation, began pushing the tram car back over the top of the dump, Steve picking up his shovel and beginning his work of clearing the end of the tracks.

All day long the lad toiled industriously. It was hard work and his back ached, yet he kept to his task. When night came Steve had the satisfaction of being told that he had done a man's work that day. [34]

A truce had been declared between the two boys, so far as fighting was concerned, though Jarvis continued his nagging at every opportunity. Steve took the other's scoffing good-naturedly, turning Bob's jibes with soft answers. For a full week both lads had labored far up on the ore dump. They had been too busy to think of their personal grievances for any great length of time. Saturday night had arrived, and when Steve left the dump to start for his boarding house he was told that the general superintendent wished to see him.

"I guess he is going to discharge me," thought the boy. "Well, I have done the best I could."

His surprise was great, therefore, when the superintendent said, as the lad came to a halt in front of the official's desk:

"You have done very well, Rush."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you still think you would like to work below ground?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you may begin on Monday."

"On what shift?"

"The day shift, going down at seven o'clock. The best I have for you now is a contract job run by a man named Spooner. You will find it pretty hard work. You see, these contracts are given out for so much per ton and the men who take the contracts propose to get as much out of their workmen as possible. You will be worked to your full capacity." [35]

"I can stand it, sir."

"If you do, you should be able to endure anything we have to offer in this business. I have arranged for Spooner to take you on as a miner's helper. Your wages will be a dollar and a quarter a day. Be very careful and guard yourself from accident. Carelessness may cost you your life, for there is danger everywhere below ground."

"I will be very careful, sir."

Steve hurried away full of anticipation. He was to be a real miner; he was to start his career as a miner on a level two thousand feet below the surface. The lad had never been below ground before and he was full of anticipation of what awaited him on the following Monday morning.

Acting on the suggestion of the boarding-house boss, the lad had purchased a suit of yellow oilcloth, rubber boots, oilcloth hat and candle holder. This latter, as used by the ore miners, is a piece of steel, one end coming to a sharp point, the other having an opening for the candle itself. The whole fastens securely to the hat. When necessary the candle holder may be carried in the hand, or driven into a crevice of rock or ore. [36]

This, with pick and shovel, comprises the miner's outfit and was the outfit of Steve Rush when he presented himself at the mouth of the shaft on the following Monday morning. There were about five hundred men to go down in the cage, the car that carries the miners and other passengers down to the various levels, and Steve found himself pushed aside, so that he was among the last to get aboard the steel cage.

"Will you tell me where the Spooner contract is located?" he asked of the cage-tender before getting aboard.

"Seventeenth level."

"Does the car stop there?"

"If it doesn't, you're a goner."

Rush leaped aboard, grasping the rod that he saw above his head to steady himself. The protecting bars in front of the cage fell in place with a noisy clang.

"All clear," announced a voice.

The support beneath the lad seemed to drop from under him. With a rush and a roar, a grinding and crunching the steel cage dropped from sight. Instantly everything was plunged in inky darkness. [37]

"Do—do they always go like this?" asked the young miner of a man standing beside him.

"This isn't going much. He has slow speed on this morning because the cage has a bigger load than usual. Afraid, are you?"

"No, I am not afraid. I was wondering what would happen if the man forgot to shut off his power when we reached the bottom."

The miner laughed.

"We'd punch a hole in the bottom of the shaft," he said.

"How deep is the shaft, sir?"

"Two thousand feet to the bottom—fifty feet less than that to the last working level. The bottom level is used to drain off the water from the other levels. From there big steam pumps pump the water to the surface."

The two could scarcely hear for noise.

"The Spooner contract is on the seventeenth level, is it not?"

"Yes, on the sub-level above the seventeenth. Is that where you are going to work?"

"Yes, sir; for Mr. Spooner."

"Then I feel sorry for you."

"Why so, sir?"

"Because he is a slave driver. Every man in the mines knows him and none of them wants to work for him. I guess he hasn't a white man on the contract." [38]

"I didn't know there were any colored men employed here."

"There are not. We call a white man one who is not a foreigner," laughed the miner.

"Oh!"

Now and then the car would halt with a jolt; two or three men would leap off and disappear in the darkness, after which the cage would drop down another level or so.

"Here is your level," announced the miner. "Jump off, or you will be carried by."

Steve jumped off.

"Thank you," he called, but the miner did not hear him, for the car had dropped quickly out of sight.

Water that had dripped down through the shaft from the surface and the upper levels was, by this time, running from the oilskins of the young miner in tiny rivulets. Dampness was everywhere. A blast of hot, damp air smote him in the face as he turned to look about him.

"I wonder where I am to go?" muttered Steve.

A heavy fog hung over everything, electric lights glowing dimly through the haze, so that one was able to see but a few feet ahead.

"Where is the Spooner contract?" called Steve to a passing miner.

[39]

The man jerked a hand over his shoulder, whereupon the lad made his way cautiously down the level or tunnel, which is the main avenue, and from which other tunnels, called drifts, run off into the ore beds.

By this time the mine was in full operation. Strange sounds smote the ears of the young miner. The roar of the electric tram cars as they dashed by him, now and then narrowly missing running him down, the thunder of the skips, huge black objects hurling themselves surfaceward loaded with iron ore, the bang, bang of the drills and the detonations of many dynamite explosions, filled the heart of Steve Rush with awe and wonder.

The lad was confused. He did not know which way to turn, nor what second he might step into an opening and plunge downward. Had he but known it there was little danger of such an accident so long as he kept to the main level. There were many dangerous holes—ore chutes—but these ordinarily were protected so that there was little chance of one's falling through them. Such accidents, however, had been known to occur.

At last Steve saw a man who looked as if he might be a person in authority, and to this one he appealed to direct him to the Spooner contract.

[40]

"Who are you?" demanded the man sharply.

"My name is Rush. May I ask who you are?"

"I am the mine captain. Do you work with Spooner?"

"I am going to do so if I can find the way to his place."

"Come this way. I will show you how to get there. You are late."

"Yes, sir; I was not able to find my way and I guess I was among the last ones to come down in the cage."

"This is your first experience below ground?"

"It is, sir."

"Then let me give you some advice; never get careless. There is danger everywhere about here."

"So I have already discovered, sir."

"There is no excuse for men getting hurt, however, if they do not get careless. That is why so many get hurt, and why some lose their lives. We do everything we can to look out for the safety of our people, but we cannot guard against everything."

"I shall try to follow your advice, sir."

The captain strode along rapidly through dark drifts, turning here and there with perfect confidence. Steve felt sure that he never should be able to find his way about in that labyrinth without getting lost, and he asked the captain how he should do so.

[41]

"Follow the crowd," was the brief answer. "There, do you see that ladder?"

"Yes, sir."

"Climb it. It is a forty-foot ladder. The top of it is the sub-level, where the Spooner contract is located."

"Thank you, sir," answered Rush, beginning his long, dark climb up the slender ladder to the unknown regions above him.

STEVE SHOTS THE CHUTES

REACHING the sub-level, as he supposed, Steve found it enshrouded in inky blackness. He was in a side drift, but he did not know it.

"I guess I am as badly off as I was before. I haven't the least idea where I am, so I guess there is not much danger of getting lost."

Removing the candle from his hat, the lad held it before him, lighting the shadows sufficiently to enable him to see where he was stepping. After a time he came out into a larger tunnel, which, he decided, must be one of the main levels, for there was a narrow track extending along it. Steve decided to follow this track and trust to luck. He had gone along for perhaps fifteen minutes when he made a discovery.

"I've lost the track!" he exclaimed. "I wonder where it could have gone to?"

The lad retraced his steps, but search as he might he was unable to find the steel rails again. For what seemed hours to him the youthful miner wandered here and there. The fact that he had neither seen nor heard anyone led him to believe that he must be far from where the work was going on. [43]

Steve was beginning to get disheartened. He was thankful that he had his dinner pail with him, in case he failed to find his way out before the day's work was done.

At last, however, he reached a drift or level, he did not know which, where he could not stand upright. The rocks overhead had been shored up with heavy timbers. It was a dangerous spot. Steve understood that without being told, so he crawled quickly through. At the far end of the low drift he encountered another ladder.

Deciding that it must lead to an upper level, the lad began climbing. He had gotten a little more than half way up when all at once his candle slipped from his hand, falling clear to the bottom, where it went out, leaving Steve in darkness.

"Oh, that's too bad. I must get it again before I dare go on any further."

Steve hurried down and began searching about on the ground for the lost candle. After a little he found it, but the candle was useless. In tramping about he had crushed it under his heavy boots, flattening the candle out hopelessly.

"Only a grease spot," muttered Steve. "Well, I can't be much worse off than I have been, so I am going back up the ladder. I surely must find someone if I keep on hunting about. There are more than five hundred men in this mine right now, and unless they are all hiding from me I am bound to run across some of them. I am afraid I am not much of a success as a miner. At least my first day below ground has been a sad failure so far." [44]

Steve was on his way up the ladder once more. It was a long climb, much longer, it seemed to him, than the other ladder had been. He began to climb faster, when all at once he received a shock that wrenched his hands loose from the rungs of the ladder. Before the lad could regain his balance he toppled over backwards and plunged downward.

Steve's head had come in contact with the rocks above, that left but a small space for a man to crawl through to reach the upper level. He had bumped his head with such force as to cause him to let go.

Grasping frantically for something to stay his flight, the lad went tumbling down. He landed on the ground at the bottom, flat on his back, bruised and breathless.

For a moment Steve lay where he had fallen. But shortly he got up, rubbing his bruises gingerly and trying to collect his thoughts.

"Tumble number one," muttered Rush. "I'll try it again."

This time he met with better success, for he managed to get through the manhole above without striking his head against the rocks. But once on the upper level the question arose as to what to do next. There was the same dense blackness over all, the same deep silence that the lad had found below. [45]

After considering a moment, he decided to feel his way along as best he could. An investigation had told him that his dinner was still safe, though the tin pail had been battered all out of shape.

"I'll bet there is some scrambled egg in the bottom of the pail," said Steve, with a short laugh.

Once more he took up his journey through the dark tunnels, feeling cautiously with feet and hands before he took a step forward. He had gone along in this way for some time when he halted abruptly, leaning forward in a listening attitude.

"What's that?" he muttered. "I know! I know what it is; it's a drill. I would recognize that 'bang, bang, bang' anywhere. That means I am close to some operations. The next thing is to find where the sound comes from. It must be ahead of me somewhere, for I can just hear it, whereas a few

moments ago I could not."

Again he began cautiously working forward. After a while the sounds came to him more clearly. Steve had swerved to the right and entered a new drift, though he was not aware of the fact and whereas he had been proceeding directly east, he was now headed south. [46]

The bang, bang of the compressed air drill was getting louder and louder as the moments passed. After a time the boy halted again. The sounds seemed to come from directly beneath him.

"I believe that is on the level below this," he decided. "How am I to find the way down to it? If I go back I shall be lost. I'll call and see if I can attract attention from any of them."

The lad shouted at the top of his voice, but only his own echoes came back to him in hollow tones.

Suddenly a twinkling light appeared far down the level. The lad recognized it at once as being a candle on a miner's hat.

"Hello, there!" he called.

"What do you want?" came the answer.

"I am lost."

"Go find yourself, then. Don't bother me."

Steve did not propose to let it go at that. He ran forward to where the miner was about to descend a ladder to the lower level.

"Won't you please help me, sir. I am in a fix." [47]

"Well, what do you want?" demanded the miner in a surly tone, pausing a few rungs down the ladder.

"I am looking for the Spooner contract. Will you please direct me to it?"

"Follow this level around to the left until you come to three drifts. Take the middle one to the end, and then go down the ladder you will find there."

"Thank you. Can you spare me a candle?"

"No; I can't."

The man grasped the side pieces of the ladder, letting himself down in a rapid slide. Steve Rush found himself once more left in darkness. At least he had his directions now, and he thought he could find his way to the contract for which he was looking.

So the lad pressed on with more confidence than before. After proceeding some distance he found by groping about that he had reached the place indicated. He took the middle drift, as directed, and hurried along this. He had no idea what time it was, but Steve imagined that it must be near noon. It seemed as though a long time must have passed since he entered the mine with the day shift, whereas, in truth, not quite two hours had elapsed.

The lad was thinking over his misfortunes, smiling grimly to himself—for Steve Rush was not a boy to whine, no matter how great his adversity—when all at once the ground seemed to drop from under his feet. [48]

On all levels there are "rises," small chutes which extend from one level to another. These are in addition to the regular ore chutes and considerably smaller. They are used for filling cars below, when necessary, as ore is always dumped downward into a lower level, from which it is hoisted to the surface, thus saving the labor of loading. It was one of these rises into which Steve had stepped. To do so he had swerved from the tunnel through which he was passing, stepping into an open pocket in the rocks, believing that he was following the wall, on which he had kept one hand constantly.

The lad uttered no cry, but he threw out both arms with quick instinct, hoping thereby to catch and hold himself. The force was too great, however, and Steve Rush shot down through the narrow opening, bound for the lower level. He did not know this; he did not know where he was going to land, but he fully expected that this last disaster would be the end of him and he shut his teeth tightly together, bracing himself to meet the shock that he knew must come within the next few seconds.

CHAPTER V

THE "MISSED HOLE"

ON the seventeenth sub-level of the Cousin Jack Mine the Spooner contract gang was working at high pressure. Two diamond drills were banging away like a battery of Gatling guns; men were rushing here and there, some were pushing small cars of red ore out through the drift to the level, where the electric trams would pick up the cars and rush them to the ore chutes. The [49]

pick men were breaking off the loosened pieces of ore dislodged by the last blast, while others were shoveling the ore into cars as if their very existence depended upon keeping up the pace.

Spooner himself, clad in a suit of oilskins, was shouting at his men, nagging, urging, threatening and directing in a perfect volley of explosive words.

A car had just been pushed out from the end of the drift where the drillers were working. It had reached a point directly underneath the rise and there it stuck, held fast by a piece of rock that had dropped to the track.

Spooner leaped forward with an angry roar.

"Out with it! I'll fire you both, you lazy, good for nothings!" he bellowed. "You ain't fit even to be swampers behind a pair of lazy mules. Push, I tell you! Push! Something will be doing here in a jiffy if you don't get that car out of the way!" [50]

His words were prophetic in a measure, for something did happen a few seconds later, though Spooner was not the author of it. Rather was he the victim.

With a crash the trap door at the bottom of the rise burst open with a sound like a dynamite explosion in a new drift. A dark object was hurled out into the level, landing squirming on the soft ore in the car.

"What—what——"

Spooner did not finish what he was about to say. The dark object bounded from the ore car, landing with great force against the angry contractor. Spooner toppled over backwards, the breath pretty well knocked out of him, collapsing in the gutter at the side of the track.

Steve Rush had found the Spooner contract at last. The lad was not much the worse for his exciting slide, though he had been somewhat bruised when he burst through the wooden trap door at the lower end of the rise.

Steve was up in a twinkling. He looked about him and in a half laughing voice demanded:

"Where am I?"

"I reckon you're on seventeen," answered one of the miners. [51]

"Where's the boss?"

"He's down there under you somewhere. I guess you knocked the daylight out of him. I hope you did. If it wasn't for my wife and family I'd a done it long time ago."

"Yes; I'd give a year's wages for the privilege of turning the diamond drill on him," added the head driller.

"Did I hit a man?" asked Steve anxiously.

"No; you hit an apology for a man," was the quick reply.

By this time young Rush was bending over, looking down into the shadows that hung over the gutter along the side of the track. He made out the figure of a man lying there.

"Help me get him up, men," he cried. "Don't you see that he is hurt?"

"Serve him right if he is," growled the trammer, the workman who pushed the cars of ore out into the main level.

"I tell you he is hurt. Lend a hand here!" commanded the boy sternly.

Something in his tone led the others to obey his order promptly. They gathered up Contractor Spooner and carried him over to where the light from the candles could be thrown on his face.

"Douse him with a pail of water," suggested the drill-man. [52]

Someone quickly adopted the suggestion, with the result that Spooner sat up almost at once, choking, roaring and threatening between his gasps for breath.

"Who—who did it? Who did it?" snarled the contractor, struggling to his feet. "Who hit me?"

The man's hat had fallen from his head, and for the moment Steve did not answer. He was too fully absorbed in gazing at the harsh face of the man before him.

Balanced on Spooner's tall, angular body was a round, bullet-like head, with a rim of reddish-gray hair. His lips were protruding, sagging at each corner, while the lids over his prominent eyes blinked as though trying to run a race with each other.

"Who did it, I say?" roared the contractor, fixing his angry eyes upon the face of Steve Rush.

"I am afraid I am the guilty one, sir. But it was an accident. I will tell you how it occurred. I——"

Spooner gave the lad no opportunity to explain. Instead, the contractor, with an angry imprecation, started for Rush.

Steve's mind worked quickly. He was not afraid; he was considering whether it were best to run [53]

or to stand his ground, and he decided upon the latter.

"Stand back! Don't you touch me! I tell you it was an accident!" shouted the boy.

The contractor was too enraged to listen to reason, and as he sprang for Rush he thrust forth his long arms to grab the boy.

Spooner got a blow on the nose that sent him staggering backward, but Steve did not follow up the advantage he had gained. He could not expect to prove a match for the powerful miner, and perhaps he would not have been able to hit the latter as he did had the other been looking for anything of the sort. Spooner was more surprised than hurt.

"If you will wait, sir, I will explain. I am sorry I fell on you and sorry I had to hit you, but you mustn't lay your hands on me. You must——"

All work in drift seventeen had been suspended for the moment, and even the diamond drills had ceased their bang, bang, bang. Every man in the drift, save Spooner himself, had uttered a yell of delight when he saw the young miner's sturdy punch.

"Look out, lad; he's coming for you again. Spooner, remember he's a boy; don't do anything you'll be sorry for. You'll be——"

The contractor had started for young Rush again.

[54]

"Get out of here!" roared the man. "Out of here before I wring your miserable neck!"

Steve snatched up an iron bar that the trammers used to fasten the catches on the cars. He raised the bar over his shoulder.

"If you try to touch me I'll hit you, sir," said the lad in a tone so polite and pleasant that Spooner paused in amazement, then uttered a hoarse guffaw. Nevertheless he halted where he was, for he saw an expression in the eyes of the boy before him which spelled trouble. Furthermore, Spooner knew how strict the rules of the mine were, and now that he had had an opportunity to get control of himself he decided not to throw the young man out bodily.

"Get out of here before I help you, then. I can't stand everything. Go to work, you lazy louts! What do you mean by standing around on my time? I'll dock every man of you an hour's pay. Start those drills. Trammers, off with you. Are you going, boy?"

"No, sir."

"You're not going?"

"No, sir; I am going to work here."

"Oh, you are, eh? Well, I think I shall have something to say about that. You're not going to work here, and I should like to know what you are doing down in this mine, anyway. I'll have the mine captain put you out. It's my opinion that you are not here for any good, and you're lucky if he doesn't turn you over to the mine police."

[55]

"I have been assigned to work in this drift. The superintendent ordered me to report to you, sir. I am ready to go to work."

The contractor gazed at the boy with a puzzled expression on his face.

"You, a boy like you, work here? Pooh! What do you think this is, a kindergarten?"

"I am able to do a day's work; besides, it is the superintendent's orders, sir."

Spooner knew the boy had the best of him there. The superintendent's orders were to be obeyed, no matter if Spooner was mining on a contract agreement.

"Very well; if you want to work you shall have all the work you can do. I'll see the superintendent about your case when I go up to-day noon."

"What shall I do?"

"Do? Don't you see anything to do?"

"I see some things I should like to do," answered Steve Rush in a significant tone, eyeing the contractor steadily.

"Get hold of that shovel. I can't break your head as I ought to do, but the shovel will break your back before you get through with this day's work."

[56]

Steve grasped the shovel and began throwing the ore into the waiting car.

Spooner eyed the lad narrowly for a few moments. He was obliged to admit that Rush handled the shovel as well as any man he had ever had in his gang.

"You ought to be in the bull gang," jeered the contractor. "Yes, sir, you are wasting your talents working in an ore drift."

"What is a bull gang?" questioned the lad between shovels.

"That is the gang that shifts the timber down into the mine," answered the man shoveling by

Steve's side. "The timber-men below take the stuff and build the supports and the lagging to keep the levels from caving in, you know."

"Where's your candle?" demanded Spooner. "You're a nice sort of a miner to come to work without a candle in your stick!"

"I lost it. You see, I lost my way and had a time getting here," explained Steve.

"Get one when you go up to-day noon. And remember you get only two hours' pay for the forenoon. If you're ever late like this again you are through right then and there."

Steve did not answer. He shoveled with all his might.

"Ready for the powder," called the head drill-man.

[57]

All the men save Steve and the powder-man laid down their tools and moved off. The boy continued at his work, his shovel making a steady scrape, scrape as he threw the ore up into the car.

In the meantime the powder-man was adjusting a charge of dynamite in each of the holes in the ore made by the drills.

"Well, boy?" called Mr. Spooner.

"Yes, sir."

"Are you going to stay there and have your fool head blown off?"

"Why——"

"Don't you see, they're going to fire a charge of dynamite. Get out of that!"

"Stand c-l-e-a-r!" called the powder-man in a sing-song tone.

All hands ran back so as to be well out of the way, and now that Steve understood what was being done, he shouldered his shovel and moved leisurely off in the direction taken by the others.

"That's the worst of a fool kid," grumbled the contractor. "They don't know enough to come in out of the wet——"

"The fuse is fired! Look out!" warned the powder-man, starting away from the scene on a run.

Steve watched the sputtering, squirming fuse far down the drift as the flame neared the charge of dynamite, six pounds all told. It seemed to him that all of them were in a dangerous position, but not being familiar with blasting, he supposed the miners knew their own business best.

[58]

It is always an anxious moment in the mines when, gathered in an expectant group, the workers underground stand waiting for the charge of dynamite to explode. It is seldom that anyone speaks during this brief period of suspense until the flash comes, followed by a puff of white smoke, a heavy report and a rain of rock and ore.

In this instance the wait seemed unusually long. The flash did not come.

"Missed hole," announced Spooner in a tone of disgust. "Five minutes of valuable time lost. That's the way the money goes in this gang. Get in there and attach a new fuse, powder-man. Don't be all day about it, either. If I wasn't around here to watch things we wouldn't get half a dozen tons a day out of this drift. First thing you know we'll all be out of a job. Come, are you going to get in there?"

"It ain't safe," answered the powder-man, shaking his head, sending a shower of grease from his candle into the face of Steve Rush.

"I see I've got to do it myself," exclaimed Spooner, grabbing a handful of fuses from the shoulders of the man who handled the dynamite.

[59]

The powder-man reached for his fuses, but the contractor already had them in his hand and was striding toward the drift.

The powder-man hesitated, then started after him on a trot.

"It's again' the rules, sir, to go in until ten minutes after firing the fuse when there's a missed hole," he warned.

"Rules!" jeered the contractor. "I'm the rules. I guess I'm running this drift."

By this time both men had reached the dome-like space where the drift ended, which included a very rich vein of iron ore.

Steve Rush shaded his eyes and, stooping over, peered into the drift. He was looking between the two men who at that moment were arguing excitedly. They appeared to have forgotten that they were treading on dangerous ground, but long familiarity with high explosives had made them careless.

The lad saw something a few feet beyond them that caused his heart to leap. A tiny spark had sprung up from the darkness, then as suddenly died out.

"Look out!" shouted the young miner, now keenly alive to the danger of the men ahead.

"Keep that kid still, or throw him down on the next level!" called Spooner over his shoulder. "I expect he'll have an attack of hysterics when we fire the blast." [60]

"I tell you it isn't a missed hole!" cried the boy.

"Don't be a fool," jeered the head trammer.

Steve did not hear him. The boy had started off with a bound. His hat dropped from his head and his shovel fell clattering to the ground. "Come back, I tell you!" shouted Rush.

A few seconds more and he was right upon them. Without wasting further words of warning, he grabbed the contractor, and with surprising strength for one of his build, Steve hurled Spooner far out into the drift, that official bellowing his rage at the indignity.

Steve reached for the powder-man. His hands had just been laid on the man's shoulders when there came a blinding flash, a detonating report, a rending and tearing of rocks, then a shower of ore and stone.

Darkness settled over the drift and all was still.

CHAPTER VI

[61]

IN THE POWDER-WRECKED DRIFT

FOR a moment those outside the end of the drift stood in awed silence. The candles on the hats of the miners had been extinguished by the explosion.

Nothing will cause an underground miner to lose his head quicker than being plunged into sudden darkness. Several of them set up a terrified yell.

"Hold your tongues!" bellowed the contractor. "You haven't been hurt. Don't you know enough to light your candles? That's the best way I know of to get rid of the darkness."

Spooner lighted his own candle, holding it in his hand above his head as he looked about. He stepped forward toward the place where his men had been drifting in the ore.

"Just as I expected," he growled. "More time wasted."

The timbers that had supported the roof of the drift had crashed downward, carrying with them a few tons of rock and ore, blocking the passage completely.

"Are—are the men in there killed?" questioned a trammer in unsteady tones.

"How should I know?" growled the contractor. "I do know that we are losing a lot of valuable time. If that fool powder-man hadn't been in such a hurry we should have been spared all this delay. Get busy with your shovels and picks here." [62]

There were ugly scowls on the faces of the miners as they sprang forward to obey the order of their employer. They knew full well that it was not the fault of either the powder-man or Steve Rush, but of Spooner himself. It was he who had insisted upon going into the drift to examine the missed hole, and had it not been for the bravery of Steve the contractor would now be lying dead behind the mass of rock.

The men spoke no word, but their hearts were full of indignation. They cared not for the loss of time, nor for any other loss that their employer might have suffered. They did care for the unfortunate man and boy buried in the drift.

In the meantime word had been conveyed to the mine captain that an accident had occurred in number seventeen. With a force of men he was already hurrying to the scene as fast as an electric tram could carry him. The word he had received was to the effect that several men had been killed. The company's surgeon had been sent for and all preparations were made to care for the wounded.

During all this time brave little Steve Rush lay inside the drift, half buried under rock and red ore. He had toppled backwards when the explosion came, half turned and had fallen face downward, his arms crossed under his forehead so that his nose and mouth were free. Otherwise he undoubtedly would have smothered before help could reach him. [63]

Steve stirred uneasily, coughed and tried to raise himself. He could not do so. He found himself held down by an oppressive weight. Some little time elapsed before his return to consciousness, and even then he was still dazed. At first he tried hard to recall what had happened, and at last it all came back to him.

"There was another in here with me—the powder-man. I wonder if he is dead?" muttered the lad.

After some difficulty the lad got his hands free of his head and began feeling about him. He made a discovery that thrilled him through and through. The body of the powder-man lay across his

own, holding the lad firmly to the ground.

Yet under these trying conditions the lad did not lose his steady nerve for an instant. As his mind became clearer he began weighing the possibilities of getting out of his predicament. He reasoned that he and his companion must have been imprisoned in some way by the explosion. All the time he was carefully twisting his body this way and that in an effort to free himself without hurting the man who was lying across him. [64]

At last Rush succeeded in crawling from under his human burden and the weight of ore and rock that hemmed them both in.

Steve's first act was to stretch forth a hand to his companion. The hand wandered from the face of the prostrate man down over the heart, where it paused.

A faint, irregular beating of that organ rewarded Steve's effort.

"He's alive," cried the lad, scrambling to his feet. "He's——"

A severe fit of coughing cut short the young miner's words. A dense cloud of suffocating powder smoke hung over the drift like a pall.

Steve dropped to the ground, pressing his face close to the earth, where he found the air better. After a few long breaths he began searching for a candle. He knew there had been one on the powder-man's cap when the explosion came. A search, however, failed to locate the candle.

"I wish I knew what to do for him," muttered the lad. "He surely will die here unless they get us out pretty soon, and I wouldn't give much for my own life if I had to stay in this awful air very long." [65]

Steve uttered a long shout, which ended in a fit of coughing.

"No more shouting for me," he muttered, wiping the tears from his eyes—tears not caused by fear or grief.

He next tried shaking the powder-man, which drew a groan from the man, whereupon the lad quickly desisted.

After a moment's reflection, the boy stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth, permitting it to cover his nose, to keep out the full strength of the powder smoke. This done, he got to his feet again, and began feeling his way about the chamber in which the accident had occurred.

"Ah, this is it!"

His hands paused when they came in contact with a heap of crushed timber, and his feet struck a mass of ore piled against the foot-wall of the drift.

For a moment Rush stood motionless, reflecting on the situation. He could hear no sounds on the outside.

"Either they are all killed out there, or else we are buried so deep that I cannot hear them. I do not know which it is, but I think it must be the latter," the boy decided. "We are imprisoned in the drift; that is certain."

The lad, after some searching about, found a shovel, and with this he began throwing the dirt back from the place where the opening had been. The effort was too much for him. Strong as he was, the shock of the explosion had weakened him and the powder smoke choked him until he went off into another fit of coughing. To relieve himself he lay down again. [66]

The fresh air along the floor of the drift strengthened him somewhat, and once more he turned his attention to the powder-man. He lifted the miner's head gently, placing it in his own lap, after which he chafed the man's hands and forehead. The miner drew a long, deep sigh and stirred uneasily. Perhaps something of the lad's tender sympathy touched his inner consciousness.

"Poor fellow!" murmured Steve, forcing back the lump that rose in his throat. "This is not a life for the weak or the timid. It is a man's work and I'm going to be a man."

Steve continued to stroke the face and hands of the powder-man until, becoming dizzy from inhaling the powder smoke, he lay down again until somewhat revived.

"I must try to attract the attention out there," decided the lad finally.

Choosing a piece of rock large enough to answer his purpose, he began thumping on the broken timbers. The attempt was not very successful, for he seemed to make no noise at all. Then something else occurred to him.



Seizing the Shovel, Steve Began Beating the Timbers.

"The shovel!" he cried. "Why did I not think of it before?"

[68]

Grabbing up the tool, he began beating the timbers with it in wide, swinging strokes.

Bang, bang, bang, went the shovel, the lad now and then pausing to listen. Once he thought he caught an answering blow from the opposite side, but he did not hear it again. Then he set up a piece of rock, the largest he could find, and began hammering on this.

Steve's ears were ringing by this time, and during the intervals when he ceased hammering on the timbers or the rock he was overcome by a roaring sound as if a great flood had been suddenly let loose. He did not understand what this meant. The silence of the underground prison had become a chaos of noises, the lad's blows became weaker and at longer intervals apart.

"I wonder what—what is the matter with me. I'm getting sleepy," he muttered.

A few more blows and the shovel dropped from his nerveless fingers. Steve staggered, then collapsed unconscious across the body of the powder-man.

CHAPTER VII

[70]

"IS ANYONE ALIVE IN THERE?"

"**O**RDER the timber-men in here! Get a pair of jacks and raise the timbers bodily. Get a move on you, men! We may be able to save them yet!"

Superintendent Penton, of the Cousin Jack Mine, had been summoned by telephone at the first sign of trouble. In his miner's outfit, with a green candle stuck in the holder on his hat, he had hurried down into the mine and made his way quickly to the sub-level where the accident had occurred. He needed no guide to reach the place, for he knew the maze of tunnels of that underground hive of industry so well that he could have followed them to any given point with his eyes shut.

A few brief, pointed questions had brought out the full story of the accident, but Mr. Penton had not addressed Spooner; he had made his inquiries from the men who had been working on that level and in the drift where the explosion had happened.

"Shovelers, here! Throw that rock back! Be careful that you do not undermine the lagging and let the roof all the way down. It's lucky the explosion blew ore enough out to hold the timbers off the ground, or our work would be much more difficult."

[71]

The superintendent had taken full charge of the operations. His long experience had told him exactly what to do. The official showed no trace of excitement; instead, his every faculty was centered on the work in hand. His tones were stern, his orders sharp and incisive.

By this time the jacks had been brought. At the superintendent's direction a heavy timber had been placed as a support under those that had been broken and the jacks set to work. Little by little, creaking and groaning, the wrecked lagging was raised inch by inch.

"Steady, there! Hold it, men!"

Those at the jacks stopped work.

"Let half a dozen shovelers get in there," Penton directed. "Throw out some of that dirt. We must get an opening as soon as possible to let air in. Throw away the larger pieces first."

In the meantime the superintendent had ordered a fresh drill brought up, the one belonging to that shift being in the wrecked drift. A line of pipe had been laid to the nearest connection to furnish the compressed air with which to operate the drill.

As soon as the rock had been removed sufficiently, the official ordered the drill set in place. He indicated where the drilling was to be done and a moment later the steady "bang, bang" of the diamond drill filled the air to the exclusion of all other sounds. [72]

"She's through, sir," announced the drill-man, nodding to the superintendent.

"Withdraw the drill."

The official placed his nose to the hole thus made, and shook his head.

"You haven't reached it. Try a hole above the shoring. We must get air in there."

Again the powerful drill began its work. Gathered in a closely massed group were the other miners waiting, silent, anxious, the flames of candles on their caps flickering and swaying from side to side in the faint draft that swirled through the long, dark cavern. Attention was divided between the working drill and the calm-faced, strong, resourceful man who was directing the operations. He was master and the men knew it.

"All right." announced the drill-man again.

The superintendent nodded. The drill was withdrawn. Following it came a little puff of white, nauseating smoke.

"We've hit it," announced the executive calmly. "Now, bore another hole on the same line but about six feet to the left, so we shall get a draft through the enclosed drift."

This was promptly done. [73]

The superintendent, as soon as the noise of the drill had ceased, placed his lips close to the hole thus made.

"Hello, in there! Is anyone alive in there?"

No answer came from the closed drift.

"They're dead. What's the use in bothering about them?" growled Spooner.

Mr. Penton shot a withering glance at the contractor.

"We will proceed on the theory that they are alive until we have learned that they are not," replied the superintendent coldly.

"Shall we go on raising the lagging?" asked the timber-man.

"No; wait until the powder smoke is out of the drift and some fresh air has taken its place. The two men in there will be suffocated unless we free the place of powder fumes. Remove the drill from the pipe and force a little air through the vent holes. Not too much; just enough to dislodge the smoke and force it out. It won't stand much pressure. There, that will do. Now, jackmen, get to work. Keep on shoveling below there."

Giving his orders calmly and encouragingly, the work proceeded with great success. The diggers were gradually boring in under the timber that the jacks were raising.

After a time their shovels and bars poked a hole through the débris into the drift. It was a small hole, so small that the average man would have difficulty in getting through it. [74]

Among those who had hurried to the scene was Bob Jarvis. He had been using a shovel industriously, and when the opening had been made he stepped up to the superintendent.

"I think I can crawl in there now, if you will let me. I want to get that Hurry-up kid out," added Bob.

"Go in, if you think you can get through," nodded the superintendent. "Better tie a rope to one foot before you start, so we can pull you out if you get wedged in."

While Bob was making ready, the official got down on his hands and knees and examined the opening in the attempt to satisfy himself that it would be safe for a man to go through.

A moment more and Bob Jarvis was wriggling through the little tunnel on his stomach. There was still so much smoke in the drift that he nearly choked as he pulled himself up and began groping

about in the darkness. Now that he was in he lighted his candle, and there before him lay the man and the boy.

Bob gave Rush a violent shake. Steve opened his eyes.

"So you're all right, eh?"

"Ye—yes. Have—have you come to li—lick me?" mumbled Steve closing his eyes. [75]

"No; I've come to get you out of this hole. We'll talk about the licking later on. Is the other fellow dead?"

Rush pulled himself to a sitting posture at this.

"No; I think not. He was alive when I went to sleep. He may be dead now. Come, we must get him out. How did you get in?"

"Crawled in through that hole. Come along; I'll help you out first. You need looking after, judging from your appearance."

Steve Rush's face was ghastly white and covered with blood in spots. He had sustained a scalp wound where a sharp-edged rock had hit him. It was evident, however, that the powder-man was in much more serious condition. The man was still breathing when Bob peered into his face.

"Yes; he's alive, but I'll help you out now," Jarvis repeated.

"You will do nothing of the sort. This man needs attention first. I'll help you with him. How are we going to get him through that small opening without hurting him?"

"We'll have to do the best we can," answered Bob.

"I'll tell you, Jarvis; you crawl in backwards and I will hand him to you. Tell those on the outside to get hold of your feet and pull when you get far enough in. Do you think he will go through the hole?" [76]

"No; we've got to dig away some dirt inside here first. This end is the smaller. The other is large enough for him. It's lucky he isn't a fat man, or we could not do it."

Together the lads labored industriously for several minutes.

"Are they alive?" called the voice of the superintendent through the hole.

"Yes, both of them. Powder-man badly injured, I think."

All preparations being made, Bob crawled into the hole, while Steve, as carefully as he could, thrust the powder-man in after, feet first.

It was a difficult task that Jarvis had set for himself, but he went at it with stubborn determination. Finally, after moments of wriggling and inch-by-inch progress, the men outside the drift managed to get hold of his feet, as Steve had directed them to do. The rest was easy.

It was now Steve's turn, and he crawled through the hole as quickly as possible, though he felt himself growing momentarily weaker. At last he stood outside the drift. He was swaying giddily.

"Take this boy to the hospital," directed the superintendent. [77]

"I'm all right, sir. That is, I will be as soon as I recover from the effects of the smoke. I'll—"

"I suppose you hid behind the powder-man to save yourself," sneered Spooner.

Mr. Penton turned on the man, his face flushing hotly. It was the first time the superintendent had shown the slightest trace of excitement.

"That will do, Spooner. You cut that out. You ought to be ashamed of yourself after this boy has saved your life. I know all about it. You will see to it that he gets full time while he is laying off in the hospital."

"Not at my expense he won't."

"Very well; then let it be at my own. But I shall see to it that you do not get another contract in the Cousin Jack Mine after you have finished with this one. I shall have something to say to you later, also, about this accident."

"Oh, of course I'll pay him if that's the way you feel about it. I'll pay him."

"I thought you would," answered the superintendent dryly.

In the meantime the powder-man had been conveyed to the surface and removed to the hospital in the superintendent's carriage, the driver having received orders to return at once. [78]

"Do you feel able to walk, Rush?" questioned the executive.

"Ye—yes, sir; I—I think so, sir."

"I'll help him," spoke up Bob Jarvis quickly.

"Yes; help him to the cage and go up with him."

Steve found that he was weaker than he thought, but leaning on Bob's strong arm he made his way to the lower level, where the lads caught the cage a few moments later and were conveyed to the surface.

"I'll not forget this, Jarvis," murmured Steve.

"Forget what?"

"Your kindness to me."

"I'm kind to you for another reason. I'll see you later. When you get well I'll have something to say to you, Miss Hurry-up," was Bob's parting shot, as he lifted the lad into the carriage and turned back to the shaft to return to his work below ground.

CHAPTER VIII

[79]

BOB MAKES GOOD HIS WORD

"THE superintendent wishes to see you at his office when convenient."

This message was brought to Steve Rush at his boarding house on the day following the accident in the drift. The lad's wounds had been treated, and he had been allowed to go home late in the afternoon of the same day. The powder-man, however, had been much more seriously injured. It was doubtful if the man ever would be able to work in the mines again.

Steve would have returned to work on the following morning, had the superintendent not given orders that he was not to do so, and the superintendent's orders were law in the mines.

The lad was somewhat surprised at the summons. However, he lost no time in going over to the offices. The superintendent was out at the moment and Rush was ushered into the handsome private office, where he was told to wait. Steve gazed about him, nodding thoughtfully.

"One of these days I shall have an office like this," he thought aloud. "Some day, in the distant future, I shall be a superintendent, too."

"So you want to be a superintendent, eh?"

[80]

The boy turned to find himself looking into the smiling face of Mr. Penton. Steve's face flushed rosy red.

"I—I guess I must have been thinking out loud, sir."

"Your ambition is a worthy one. Keep on in the way you are going and promotion is sure. You are now a part of one of the greatest games in the industrial world. Realize this and you have made a long stride forward. How are you feeling to-day?"

"I do realize it, sir, and I am proud of the very small part I am playing in that world. In answer to your question, I am feeling perfectly well to-day; I am ready for work."

"To-morrow will be time enough. Take the day off. Your pay will go on just the same. In this connection there is another little matter that I have sent for you to adjust. You are not of age?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"I will state what I have to say, just the same. It is customary, when one has been hurt in the mines, to have our claim adjuster call upon him at proper time and make such settlement as can be agreed upon, after which the injured party signs a release. I have prepared a release here with the amount left blank. You have done a very brave act; I am willing to do what is right in the matter. To what extent do you think you have been damaged, Rush?"

[81]

There was a quizzical look in the eyes of the superintendent as he asked the question.

"Have you the release?"

Mr. Penton handed a paper to the boy. The latter read it through carefully, then asking for a pen, drew a line through the space left blank for the amount and signed his name.

"I am not that kind of man, Mr. Penton," said Steve. "If you wish my mother's signature to the paper, I will have her sign it. I do not care to receive any money that I have not earned."

"Rush," said the superintendent, rising and placing a hand on the boy's shoulder, "you talk like a true man. You *are* a true man. It is not your refusal of the money that causes me to say that, but the principle that prompted the refusal. I felt that you would act as you have done. I see I was not mistaken in you. You will get on. No boy with your spirit could help getting on. Do you wish to be transferred from Spooner's shift to one not so hard?"

"No, sir; I am not looking for an easy job. I am looking for hard work and to learn everything there is to learn in this great industry. When I have earned promotion I want it."

"And you shall have it. Finish the week in level seventeen and I'll see what can be done for you in some other direction. Do you think you will be able to work to-morrow?" [82]

"Oh, yes, sir."

Mr. Penton shook hands with him and the lad departed, light hearted and happy. He did not waste the time that he was resting—not Steve. Instead he went directly back to the works, remaining all day in the vicinity of the shaft watching the progress of the work and asking questions whenever he could find anyone willing to answer them. He visited the dry houses, where the miners changed their clothes and took their shower baths, a clean, comfortable building provided with numbered lockers for the street clothes of the employés of the company, and where those who chose might eat their lunches in the cold weather.

Steve learned a lesson that he did not forget. He learned it from the old pensioner in charge of the dry houses.

"Make your men comfortable, look out for their safety and you will get fully a third more work out of them," said the old attendant. And this was the principle on which the company acted.

The day passed quickly, and Steve went early to bed, in order to be up early on the following morning. This time he took no chances of getting lost in the mine. He followed one of the trammers who worked in his part of the mine, and reached Spooner's contract some fifteen minutes before the hour for beginning work. The contractor liked to have his men on the job early, and when he could drive them into doing so, he managed to get ten minutes or so extra work out of them before the whistle on the level blew the signal to begin work. [83]

Steve smiled good-naturedly when Spooner ordered him to get in and begin shoveling. The lad was not averse to doing so. All evidences of the accident had been removed and once more the drift was open and workable. A new powder-man had taken the place of the injured man, a quiet, self-contained young fellow on whom Spooner's bulldozing tactics had no effect.

"See here, boy, how about that shovel?" demanded the contractor, after the lad had been working a short time.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean the shovel you banged up hammering on the drift to make us hear."

Rush looked puzzled.

"What about it, sir?"

"Shovels cost money. I have to furnish the tools on my job. I'll expect you to pay for that one. Got any money with you?"

"No, sir." [84]

"Well, see that you bring it to-morrow. The shovel's worth a dollar."

"Yes, sir. I will speak to the superintendent about it, and if he says it is proper for me to pay you I will do so," replied the lad wisely.

"Speak to the superintendent?" shouted the contractor. "You'll do nothing of the sort. I'm running my business; the super isn't. If you try that game on me I'll fire you. You don't have to pay for the shovel if you don't want to. But you're a cheat if you don't."

"I am not a cheat," protested Steve indignantly. "As I said before, if the superintendent says I ought to pay you, I shall do so gladly. You can fire me if you wish to. I am not so much in love with number seventeen that I would shed tears were I ordered out of it."

The contractor glared, started to speak, then gaining control of himself, turned and walked away. Rush, in the meantime, was energetically throwing dirt and when the long day was ended he had shoveled into ore cars ten tons of soft ore. The lad handed his tally slip to the contractor at the close of the day's work.

Spooner uttered a grunt of disapproval.

"Only ten tons!" he groaned. "You'll have to do better than that. Unless you can handle twelve you're not fit to be below ground."

"I understand, sir, that twelve tons a day is the record and that only one man has accomplished that in the last ten years," answered the boy promptly. "But I'll equal it before I am through here; not especially to gratify you, but for my own satisfaction." [85]

Mr. Spooner had no more to say.

"How many tons a day does he get out of this contract?" asked Steve, as he was waiting for the cage to ascend to the surface.

"Fifty tons is the most we ever got out in a day," was the answer from Steve's companion.

"How much does he get a ton?"

"That we don't know. He never tells his business. Some contractors get less and some more,

depending upon how the ore runs, how much paint rock there is to be thrown out in the dirt."

"Do the others run about the same?"

"I reckon they do."

Steve was always seeking for information, and what he was learning in these early days was to serve him well in the future.

For the rest of the week he worked diligently, increasing his daily output by at least a ton. One day he fell considerably below this, as the ore came out hard and was not delivered to the car men as fast as they could handle it. That was a day that Spooner was at his worst.

Saturday came, the day that the young miner was to receive his first pay envelope. He had made it a practice to carry his lunch below and eat it there. This saved him considerable effort, and gave him an opportunity to rest before the whistles blew to resume work. Steve usually chose some quiet spot in an unused drift, where, seating himself by the side of a little stream of water trickling from the rocks, he would stick his candle-holder in a crevice and tuck the cover of his dinner pail under the trickling stream to catch water to drink with his meal. [86]

He had just settled himself down for his noon-day meal, on this Saturday afternoon, when he was attracted by a bobbing candle on a miner's cap approaching him from down the drift just off the main level.

"Now, I wonder what he wants?" mused Rush, peering out curiously. "I believe that's Bob Jarvis. He is probably coming in here to eat his dinner. He'll be surprised to find me here. Hello, Bob."

"Hello yourself."

"I just did. Sit down and have lunch with me."

"I ain't lunching to-day. I——"

"Eat some of mine if you haven't yours with you. There is enough for both of us in my pail, and here is some of the finest water you ever drank. It's colder than any ice water I ever tasted." [87]

Bob did not reply. He was standing over Steve, peering down at the latter with a steady gaze. Presently Rush noticed that Jarvis was acting peculiarly. There was a constraint in his manner that Steve had never seen there before.

"What's the matter? Anything gone wrong, Bob?"

"No; nothing has gone wrong. Something's going that way pretty soon, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I promised you a licking, didn't I?"

"I believe you did, but that is all past now. You saved me from the drift. I shan't forget that, old fellow. I hope I get a chance to do you a good turn one of these days."

"You're going to get it now."

"I am going to get what?"

"The licking."

Steve rose slowly to his feet after carefully placing his dinner pail to one side.

"Do you mean you want to fight me after having saved my life, Bob Jarvis?"

"That's what!"

Rush gazed steadily at his companion of the moment. The taller boy had assumed a pugnacious attitude.

"I don't want to fight you, Bob." [88]

"Then you'll stand for a coward; you'll be a 'missie' for certain."

Steve began slowly to strip off his oilskins. His blouse and flannel shirt came next. These removed, he stuck his candlestick in a crevice in the rocks high enough up to shed a fairly good light over the drift.

"How'll you have it?" he asked coolly.

"No hitting below the belt; hammer in the clinches when we can. All fair and above board," answered Jarvis, making himself ready for the fray.

"Very well," replied Steve. "I am ready whenever you are."

"GOING to take off your boots?" questioned Steve.

"Sure."

"Then I'll take mine off, too."

He did so, tightened his belt and stepped out into the drift well within the flickering circle of light shed by the two candles.

"How are we going to decide it, Bob?"

"The fellow who gets knocked out first loses. No second chance. Are you ready?"

"I've been ready for the last five minutes."

"Look out—I'm coming!"

Jarvis made a rush, swinging a quick blow at the head of his opponent. Steve ducked and went under it, at the same time giving Bob a jolt in the ribs that made the larger boy grunt.

"Hello! You ain't such an easy mark as you'd have me believe, eh? Been playing off, have you? Said you couldn't fight."

"I never said so. I said I wasn't a fighter. I hope I have higher ambitions in life than that. But is this a fight or an argument?"

"It's a fight," shouted Jarvis, dancing in, his arms working like a piston rod.

Both boys led for the head at the same instant. Each countered with his left, receiving the other's blow on his arm. After a rapid exchange of blows, none of which landed, they backed away. But Steve, without waiting for his opponent to take the lead, became the aggressor now. He sprang in as lightly as a cat, and ere the taller boy could get his guard up, had planted a blow on Jarvis' nose that sent the other's head back and the blood spurting from his nose. [90]

Whack!

Steve landed another on the side of Bob's jaw. It was a glancing blow, Jarvis having turned a little, else the boy would have been knocked out and the battle ended then and there.

Quick as a flash, Jarvis put a fist to Steve's neck and the lad went down in a heap while Bob stood over him exultingly.

"Got your medicine that time, didn't you?" he jeered.

Steve, on all fours, was getting ready to spring up. His eyes were on his adversary, watching him narrowly. Rush's head was aching, but he gave no heed to that.

"You will have to give it to me in bigger doses than that if you expect a cure," retorted Steve, with a short laugh, as he sprang up and danced away from the taller boy for a few seconds. Then he closed in like a whirlwind. For a full minute it was give and take. Both lads were strong, and each was handy with his fists, though Steve Rush showed more skill than did his opponent. This was offset by Jarvis' greater height and weight. [91]

Many a hard blow was struck in that round, after which the boys backed away instinctively. Jarvis' nose had sustained several bangs. It was somewhat larger than when the fight had begun; Steve, on the other hand, had a half-closed eye.

"I'll put a spectacle on the other one before I've done with you," jeered Bob.

"Then I'll give you one of the same sort," retorted Steve, planting a blow on Bob's right eye. Bob dropped as if he had been hit with a club. But he was up like a flash. This time he was thoroughly angry. He charged Steve with a roar, receiving two quick, short-arm jolts on the side of the head that made that member spin dizzily.

For the next five minutes it was give and take again. Then Steve struck his opponent a blow in the ribs that brought a loud "ouch!" from the taller boy.

Rush grinned, but there was no mirth in the grin. It was one of savage satisfaction. Now the lad settled down grimly to his work. He battled with dogged determination, taking his punishment as a matter of course, beating, hammering, dodging, ducking, but without the slightest trace of anger or excitement in his face. His was a will that in the battle of life sweeps all obstacles from its path. [92]

The battle had not been in progress long before a miner passing the outer end of the drift had discovered what was going on. Summoning some of his companions, the men ran down where the fight was in progress. They were about to interfere, when Steve, in a momentary lull, said:

"Please don't interfere. This is a perfectly friendly little argument. We've got to fight it out."

The men laughed uproariously.

"You look the part, both of you. Go it, then, if you've got to fight. We'll see that each of you gets

fair play."

But the boys did not hear. They were at it again and with a savageness that had not marked their fighting before. Two blows delivered at the same instant landed both boys on their backs on the ground.

The miners yelled for sheer joy.

Bounding to their feet, the combatants went at it again hammer and tongs; and, though they were mere lads, it is doubtful if the spectators ever had witnessed a more scientific battle with fists. The lads were side-stepping and dancing in their stocking feet, not heeding the sharp pieces of rock and ore that cut into their feet, drawing the blood at almost every step. [93]

They had battled steadily for over ten minutes. The face of each was covered with blood and it was with difficulty that the lads were able to see at all. They had barely one set of good eyes between them. Jarvis was getting more and more desperate. Try as he might his superior strength was not equal to the task of putting Steve Rush down and out. For every blow delivered Bob got a return that he felt all over his body from his head to his feet.

At last Bob thought he saw an opening to deliver a knock-out blow. He let go with all his strength. The blow struck nothing more substantial than thin air. Then, like a bolt of lightning, the fist of Steve Rush shot out, catching Jarvis under the nose, lifting the larger boy from his feet, sending him crashing against the shore wall of the drift.

"That settles him," shouted the spectators. "My, what a wallop! That would have knocked down one of the mules in number seven level. I'll bet he doesn't wake up in——"

Bob Jarvis was already awake. Despite the terrific blow under which he had gone down he was quickly on his feet. It was observed that he staggered a little. Both boys were beginning to show their weariness, though Jarvis exhibited more of this than did Steve. [94]

"Call it a draw, lads," yelled the miners.

"Not till I give him back for that last one," roared Bob, making a vicious lunge at his companion.

The blow barely grazed the left cheek of the smaller of the lads, he having moved his head slightly to one side to avoid the blow.

"I'll hand it out to you, Bob," said Steve.

Once more Jarvis was lifted from his feet and this time he was laid on his back on the ground, while Steve leaned against the wall of the drift, panting heavily.

"Call it off! Call it off, or we'll take a hand in the game," warned the miners.

Jarvis had staggered to his feet and Rush was lurching to meet him.

There was a slow exchange of blows and the lads clinched, each with an arm about the other's neck. For a full minute they stood thus, panting, striving to collect their strength to continue the battle.

Jarvis made a feeble effort to deliver a right-hand hook on his opponent's jaw, but there was not enough steam in the blow to do any damage.

Steve retaliated with a vicious punch in the pit of Jarvis' stomach—a blow that made the larger boy grunt and cling heavily to the neck of his adversary. [95]

"Have you got enough?" breathed Steve.

"No!"

Bob managed to land a fairly strong blow on Steve's neck.

The latter returned the compliment by a vicious punch in the ribs that caused the larger boy to hug his opponent closer. Then all at once, with the last ounce of their failing strength, the two youthful gladiators began delivering short-arm jolts, each standing with an arm about the other's neck, driving in the blows with all the strength he had left.

Not for a moment had either lad sought to foul the other. It was a "square" fight, such as is seldom seen between professionals.

No more steam was left in their blows. They had fired their last round.

"Shall we call it quits, Bob?" breathed Rush in the ear of his opponent.

"I—I guess we'd better, if we expect to report for duty this afternoon."

Steve promptly released himself from the grip of the other boy's arm, and, staggering to a side wall, leaned against it heavily. Jarvis did the same.

Just then the whistle blew three sharp blasts. It was the signal for the miners to return to their work. Jarvis staggered out into the centre of the drift, extending a hand. Steve met him half way. [96]

"Shake!" said Bob. "You're the squarest and the pluckiest bundle of muscle that I ever went up against."

"The same to you," glowed Steve Rush, gripping the hand of his late adversary. Then each with an arm about the other's shoulder started for the main level. The desperate battle that was to be the beginning of a friendship of many years, had ended in a draw, with Steve having a shade the better of the argument.

CHAPTER X

[97]

IN A NEW JOB

THAT afternoon was the longest that Steve Rush ever remembered having put in. Spooner saw at once that the lad had been in a fight, and that he was well nigh spent. The contractor took the keenest possible delight in driving Steve, just because the lad was in no condition to work.

The Iron Boy, however, possessed too much grit to show the white feather. In spite of his swollen face and aching body, he summoned all his courage and worked as he never had worked before.

With Bob Jarvis it was different. Bob worked half of the afternoon, when the shift boss under whom he was laboring, observing that the lad could scarcely stand up, sent him home, and Jarvis promptly went to bed. The shift boss reported the circumstance to the mine captain and the latter made a written report to the general superintendent, Mr. Penton. Another report showed that Steve Rush had also been in a fight.

When the superintendent had read these two reports, he at once understood that Jarvis and Rush had had a battle. The rules against fighting were very strict; therefore he sent for the mining captain, the one directly in charge of all the operations underground. The two men had a long interview and when the captain finally left the superintendent was smiling broadly.

[98]

On the following Monday morning Steve was requested to call at the office of the general superintendent before reporting for work in the mine.

"Bob, he's heard about our difficulty and he is going to fine or fire me," said Steve.

Bob's face took on a serious expression.

"Then I'm going to see the superintendent," he said in an emphatic tone.

"What for, Bob?"

"I am going to tell him that you are not to blame—that I forced you into the fight. I'll take whatever punishment is coming to me, but I won't stand by and see you get the worst of it—not for a skip full of red ore."

The boys were in their room at the boarding house, they having asked the boarding boss to bunk them in the same room after their fight in the mine. This had been done willingly enough and to their mutual satisfaction.

"I guess not," replied Steve firmly. "What do you take me for?"

"You know what I take you for. I have already told you."

[99]

"If I remember correctly, you called me Little Miss Rush up to a couple of days ago," answered Steve, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Forget it. I've changed your name. You're Mr. Big Rush now. Such a walloping as you gave me I never had before in my life. You're a regular little cyclone. And to think that I had picked you for an easy mark."

Bob smiled as broadly as his swollen face would permit.

"We have agreed to forget that. It was worth while, though, because it was the beginning of our friendship," replied Rush thoughtfully. "We shall never have another misunderstanding."

"I hope not."

"But we must be going. You will be late for work. I will see the superintendent; then I'll let you know, to-day noon, what he wanted of me."

The lads hurried out.

"I wish you would let me go with you and tell him," urged Bob.

"No. Time enough when he sends for you."

As the lads moved along the workmen laughed and some of them jeered, for it was plain that the lads were on terms of intimate friendship. The story of their great battle had been circulated until most of the men in the mine had heard of it.

[100]

Bob's face flushed angrily.

"Never mind, old man," said Steve in a soothing tone. "A lot of those fellows who are laughing at

us to-day will be shoveling dirt for you and me before many years have passed."

"I doubt it."

"I do not. There are great opportunities in this big corporation, and I am going after them. I am after them now, and I propose to take you along with me. You'll find the company will be glad to help us on if they find we are worth helping. Here we are at the superintendent's office. I shall have to leave you now."

The boys shook hands warmly, Bob turning reluctantly and going on his way, while Steve ran up the steps and entered the executive building. He asked for the superintendent and was told to go in at once. The clerks all smiled at Steve's disfigured face, but he pretended not to have seen their scrutiny of him.

"Good morning, Rush," greeted Mr. Penton, with a quizzical look at his caller.

"Good morning, sir. You sent for me."

"Yes; sit down."

The superintendent was a large man, six feet tall, big, broad and powerful, but good nature shone from his round, full face, and his eyes always appeared to be sparkling with laughter. For all of that, Mr. Penton was a strict disciplinarian, as a number of those who had worked under him had reason to know. [101]

"Who was the young man with whom I saw you shaking hands in front?" was the superintendent's first question.

"Bob Jarvis, sir. He is my roommate."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long have you been rooming together?"

"Since Saturday."

"Indeed. This is somewhat surprising. But, Rush, what has happened to you? You look as if you had been through an ore grinder."

Steve flushed, then straightened up, eyeing the superintendent steadily.

"I have been in a fight, sir. I had a little disagreement, but it is all right now."

"My lad, did you not know that it was against the rules of the company to fight?"

"I did not at the time."

"With whom did you fight?"

"Must I answer that question, sir?"

"Yes."

"I fought with Bob Jarvis," replied the lad, after slight hesitation.

"Who started the fight?"

"I guess I was the one most to blame." [102]

The superintendent already knew all about the matter. He well knew who had started the fight and why, and he knew also of the warm friendship that had sprung up between the two boys since the battle; but Mr. Penton was a shrewd man—one who judged men with almost unerring instinct. He was drawing Steve out to verify his own impressions.

"And you two are rooming together now?"

"Yes, sir. We are friends now. There will be no more trouble between us. As a matter of fact, our little battle was an entirely friendly one."

The superintendent leaned back, laughing heartily. His plump sides shook with merriment, while Steve sat calm and respectful, his eyes fixed on the face of his employer.

"You are quite sure that you two will not fight again, are you?" questioned Mr. Penton, after regaining his equanimity.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Who won the fight?"

"Neither of us, sir, though Bob gave me about all I wanted."

"And I understand that you gave him a little more than he wanted. Now, Rush, let me give you a piece of advice. Never indulge in fights, unless in self-defence, in defence of the company's property or to save another person. We have a rough element in the mines. Naturally that cannot be wholly avoided, especially among the foreigners, though many of them are self-respecting [103]

citizens. It requires a strong man to cope with them and every executive must be equal to the task, but we cannot tolerate any rows except for the reasons mentioned."

"I understand, sir. I think you can trust me."

"I am sure of that. I want to see you get ahead. You are both fine boys. You have the making of men worth while—in other words, you are 'live ones,' and this company is always in the market for just that kind of material."

"Thank you, sir."

Steve's face glowed happily.

"I am going to take you off the Spooner contract and give you another place to work. I have taken a keen interest in you, and I want you to learn all about the workings of the mine."

"That is what I am going to do, sir," answered Rush in a quiet but firm tone.

"I have decided to place you at the main chute on the same level where you have been working. Your duty will be to dump the cars as they come in. You will be right by the tally-boards and you will learn how we count up there, besides many other things. It is an important point, the central point of each level. After you have become familiar with the operations at that point, perhaps I may be able to transfer you to some other."

[104]

"I thank you very much, sir. May I ask where Bob Jarvis is going to work? He said he was to be transferred to-day."

"Yes; I have put him on the Spooner contract to fill the place you had."

Steve smiled. He could well imagine what would happen if Spooner treated Bob as he had treated Steve. Bob was too hot tempered to endure the contractor's insults without resenting them.

Mr. Penton seemed to understand what was in Steve's mind.

"It will be good for the boy," he nodded. "Every boy needs a certain amount of hard knocks. They make a man of him."

"Bob is quite a man already," replied Rush, with a faint smile.

Mr. Penton laughed good-naturedly.

"Yes, I understand. You will report at the chute at once. Tell the mine captain to inform the time keepers of your change of place. That will be all."

Expressing his thanks to the superintendent, Steve left the office and made his way to the mine, to take up his new work—work that was to be much less trying than that of the previous week.

[105]

After the lad's departure Mr. Penton spent a long time in studying a bundle of reports of the work in the Cousin Jack Mine. His eyes soon lost their twinkle, and his forehead wrinkled with perplexity.

"This passes all understanding. This shortage in the output is something that I cannot understand. If I do not find the leakage soon I shall be in trouble with the company," he muttered.

Then, putting on his coat and hat, he left the office and started for the mines.

CHAPTER XI

[106]

RUSH MAKES A DISCOVERY

STEVE'S new station was located on the main line of the electric tram road. Long rows of dump cars were drawn there by an electric motor, on which sat a motor-man controlling the speed of the car with one hand, and with the other continually ringing a gong warning everyone to get out of the way.

In the narrow levels, there was barely space enough for one to stand between the trams and the wall, but the trams never stopped. Miners were supposed to look out for themselves, according to the code of the tram motor-man.

At the chutes, however, there was a large open space at one side, with a plank floor laid down, and above this hung the tally-boards, a series of boards with quarter-inch holes bored in them. Every time cars were run over the chutes the men on the cars would call the name of the contractor or the drift whence the cars had come, and the tally-boy or man, as the case might be, would then move the peg in the board forward as many holes as there were cars. Each contractor had a tally-board, as had each drift operated by the mining company's own labor.

The tally-man at the chutes on level seventeen was a man named Marvin. Steve took a violent dislike to the man the moment he set eyes on him, and the questions that the lad would have

[107]

asked about the working of the tally-boards remained unasked.

Rush's duty was to strike the catch on the side of the car with an iron bar, permitting the side board to swing out, whereupon the load of ore would drop through the iron chutes to a lower level. From there it was shot to the surface in the fast-moving skips, or ore elevators, that ran up an inclined plane.

"This work is so easy that I am ashamed to draw pay for it," muttered Steve, after an hour or so had passed.

Still he was obliged to keep a sharp lookout for approaching trams, as every second in this operation counted. The tram trains must unload and get back for other cars promptly, else miners working in the drifts would be held back and the work of that level delayed.

As soon as a car was dumped, the dumper would call out "clear," whereupon the motor-man would shove his train forward. Though the work was easy, it had to be done quickly.

During the forenoon Superintendent Penton and the mine captain came swinging along the tracks. The superintendent spoke pleasantly to Steve, after which the two men took a seat on a bench in the planked alcove close to the place where the boy was dumping cars of ore. [108]

"This shortage is troubling me greatly Jim," said Mr. Penton.

Steve could not help but hear their conversation, his station being on that side.

"It has me beaten, too, sir," answered the mine captain. "I have been through this mine from top to bottom, and from end to end, and for the life of me I can't see where any such shortage as you say the reports show could have occurred."

"You are sure the tally-boards are being properly kept?"

"Yes; I have looked into that. Have you any idea that someone is tricking us?"

"No; I hardly think so. I believe, rather, that it is the result of carelessness somewhere. The report sheets show more ore mined than weighs up after it is put on the cars. In other words, the output shown on our reports doesn't check up with the company's tally-sheets at Duluth. We are a good many tons short. It is up to you, Jim, to put your finger on the shortage. There is going to be trouble over this, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Yes; there'll be trouble enough when we find out where it is—trouble for the fellow or fellows who are to blame for it," answered the mine captain. [109]

"Well, keep your eyes open. If you need any help, let me know."

"I've had the inspectors on the job for a week now, and they are no nearer solving the mystery than they were before they began."

Mr. Penton was watching Steve at work with a thoughtful expression in his eyes.

"That's a promising boy, Jim," he said.

"You mean young Rush?"

"Yes. This is the kind of job I should like to turn him loose on, if he had more experience. He's as sharp as a steel trap."

"That is true."

"He has that dogged persistence that would make him hang on like a bull terrier. I'm going to push him along as fast as seems advisable."

"He's a likely youngster," admitted the mine captain, studying Steve's back as the lad swung his iron bar with unerring precision. "Yes, he's a very likely lad."

"I want to make an inspection of number twelve," said the superintendent, rising. "Will you come along?"

The captain followed his superior officer, the two men soon disappearing down the level. Steve watched their bobbing candles until he could see them no longer.

"Something is going on here," muttered the boy. "Reports show more ore taken out than has really been mined. I didn't want to listen, but I couldn't help hearing what they said." [110]

For the rest of the forenoon Steve occupied his leisure moments in trying to study out how such a mistake could occur. He was not thoroughly familiar with the working of the system as yet, but he possessed a good general idea of the methods employed to protect the company against mistakes and dishonesty.

The time-keepers made their rounds four times a day, and any man not at his post lost his time until the next round. The ore was tallied at the chutes and weighed again after it had been placed on railroad cars for transportation to the Great Lakes. All this Steve went over, his mind working actively on the subject while his hands were busy dumping cars of ore.

"The mistake, if it is a mistake, must occur somewhere between this chute and the freight yards," was the lad's mental conclusion.

In this he was right. So full of his subject was he that, when the whistle blew, he sat down on the bench that the superintendent had occupied a few hours before and studied the tally-boards as he ate his lunch. The manner of the tally operation was clear to him. There was nothing complicated about it.

Having finished his lunch, the lad strolled over to the tally-boards, and, with hands behind his back, began studying the names of the drifts or contractors represented there. Spooner's was the first to attract his attention. [111]

"I'll bet I have shoveled that board full half a dozen times," muttered the lad, with a grin.

"What do you want here?" demanded a surly voice at the lad's elbow.

Rush turned and found himself facing the tally-man, Marvin.

"I was just looking over the boards as a matter of curiosity."

"Oh, you were, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, folks' curiosity sometimes gits them into trouble," sneered the tally-man.

"There is no harm in my looking at the boards, is there?" demanded Steve, raising his voice ever so little.

"Git out of here! Git out, I say! If ever I catch you fooling around these boards I'll trim you so you won't forget it," growled Marvin.

Steve stepped back. Perhaps he had no business there, but he resented the manner in which the information was delivered to him.

"I do not think it will be well for you to lay hands on me," he retorted.

"What's that?"

"If you don't hear well, I'll shout. I don't think it will be well for you to lay hands on me." [112]

The tally-man strode across the planking and stood threateningly over the lad, who had reseated himself on the bench.

"Git off this platform!"

"Oh, no, you don't. I have as much right here as you have. You can't drive me away from here, my friend. I'll stand on my rights here. This is the place where I'm going to stick until the whistle blows to go to work. If you think I am not going to do so, just try to put me off."

Rush's jaw assumed a stubborn set. The man and the boy eyed each other for a moment; then Marvin turned on his heel and walked away.

Steve grinned appreciatively.

"I guess I had better look out for him. He surely has it in for me now."

The whistle blew soon after, and work was resumed. Steve, during the afternoon, was too busy to pay much attention to the tally-boards, for the cars were coming fast, additional motors having been sent out to take care of the rush. But every time the lad glanced toward the boards he found Marvin watching him narrowly.

Once the lad observed something that set him to thinking harder than ever. After that he paid no further attention to Marvin, nor to Marvin's work. When the whistle blew at six o'clock Rush picked up his dinner pail and made his way to the shaft, and a few minutes later had been hoisted to the surface by the cage. He waited at the mouth of the shaft until Jarvis came up, when the two boys started for home together. [113]

"How did you get along on the Spooner contract?" questioned Rush, with a quizzical smile.

"Never did such a day's work in my life! That fellow is a slave driver."

"He is all of that," agreed Steve. "Have any words with him?"

"Nothing of consequence. I threatened to break his head with a shovel once—that's all."

"I should think once would be enough," replied Steve, laughing softly. "Don't let him run over you, but keep your hands off him. It's a pretty serious thing to have an argument with one's superior, even if he *is* a brutal contract boss."

"I'm surprised that they have a fellow like that in the mines."

"He gets out the ore, that's why," answered Rush. "And, by the way, I want to talk over something with you after supper to-night." [114]

"You have something on your mind, eh?"

"Yes; I have something that I want you to help me with. Perhaps we may be able to do a great

service for our employers. I am not quite sure yet. I can't be until we have tried something."

"I'm with you in anything, Steve," answered Bob with emphasis.

After supper, that night, the boys went directly to their room, where they were soon lost in earnest conversation. Their conversation was carried on in whispers and the hour was well along toward midnight when they had finished with their plans.

"Now what do you think of it?" questioned Steve, as they started to make ready for bed.

"If you've struck it right we have stumbled on to the biggest game of crookedness in the mines. I mean *you* have discovered it; you didn't exactly stumble on the game."

"Be very careful. Don't make any mistake. I, on my part, will keep my eyes open if I find I can do so without attracting attention. To-morrow night we will compare notes."

"Don't worry about me. I'll have it down pat. All ready to turn in?"

"Yes."

Bob blew out the light and the boys tumbled into bed, where they were soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER XII

[115]

THE BOYS EXPOSE A PLOT

ON the following morning, when the lads reported for work, they were full of their new purpose. Each was silent as to what that purpose was, but a close observer would have noticed that the boys were keenly watchful of everything that was going on about them. To all intents Steve was devoting his energies to unloading the dump cars in the shortest possible time, and Bob to filling them again in record time.

Up to the noon hour nothing had occurred of interest. The two boys did not meet at the lunch hour, deeming it best not to arouse suspicion by their actions, and thus possibly defeat their purpose. Steve ate his lunch in silence, not once looking toward the scowling Marvin. In fact, Marvin had not caught the boy looking at him during the forenoon.

"I think the fun will begin before long," mused Steve, wiping his mouth and moving over to a trickling spring on the other side of the level. "I have prepared the way and now we shall see."

A long train of ore cars came in a few moments after the whistle blew, and the tally-man was kept busy plugging the holes in the boards as the cars were called out.

[116]

So busy was Marvin that he did not get a chance to turn about to look at Steve. Perhaps he would not have done so, at any rate. Steve, however, was looking at the tally-man, watching the latter out of the corners of his eyes.

The pegs moved skilfully and quickly from hole to hole on the boards, then the man Marvin sat down while the unloading progressed.

Rush had seen that which sent the color to his cheeks, and caused his heart to beat a little faster. His sharp eyes had made a discovery. He was as positive as it was possible to be but there was more to be done before his case was fully made out.

The lad could hardly wait until night to see his companion. During the afternoon Steve obtained further evidence to strengthen his case. By quitting time his face had taken on a look of stern determination that had not been there when he went to work that morning.

"What luck?" demanded Bob, in a low voice, as he joined his companion near the mouth of the shaft.

"The best," answered Steve.

"Tell me about it."

"Not here. Wait until we get home. I do not dare to speak of it now. Someone might overhear us and then all our efforts would have been for nothing. I'll tell you all about it before we sit down to supper."

[117]

"Well, that beats all," muttered Jarvis. "I didn't think we should succeed so easily. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll answer that question also when we get home, old man."

The boys did not wait until after supper that night. Closing and locking the door after reaching their room, Steve asked:

"How many tons did the Spooner contract turn out to-day?"

"Forty by the dump cars."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes. What does the tally show?"

Steve leaned over and whispered in his companion's ear, whereat Bob uttered a low, long-drawn whistle.

"You—don't—say?"

"That is exactly what I do say."

"This will raise a merry row."

"I think it will. And there's another thing: I will wager that this is not the only place the same game is being worked."

"Maybe you're right. What shall we do?"

"Go to the superintendent. We will go to him as soon as we finish our supper."

"But he isn't at his office."

[118]

"No. We will go direct to his house. I rather think he will be glad enough to see us when he hears what our mission is. Come, now, we'll go to supper, but not a word at the table," warned Steve.

"I should say not."

Supper finished, the Iron Boys went to their room, returning a few minutes later and strolling from the house as though they were going nowhere in particular. After they had put a block between themselves and the boarding house they quickened their pace. Bob was excited, but Steve was as calm and collected as if nothing unusual had occurred.

"Do you know where the superintendent lives, Steve?"

"Of course I do. I make it my business to know everything that I ought to know. 'Live and learn' is my motto. It's a good one for you to adopt, too."

"I am beginning to think you are right."

Reaching the house of the general superintendent, Rush halted. The blinds had not been drawn and, looking through the front room into the dining room beyond, the Iron Boys could see the superintendent seated at the table with his family.

"I think we had better walk up and down a few times until Mr. Penton finishes his supper," suggested Rush.

[119]

"He'll be better natured if we do, I guess," agreed Jarvis. "You have a long head on you, Steve, but the trouble with you is that you keep that fact so carefully concealed that a fellow doesn't get wise to it until it's too late."

Steve laughed softly. They had made their third trip around the block when, halting once more in front of the house, they saw that the superintendent had finished his supper. He was standing in the dining room, hat in hand, talking with a member of his family.

"Come on," called Steve, running up the walk, up the steps and ringing the bell.

"My, but you do bear out your name, the way you rush about," laughed Jarvis.

The door was opened by a servant. Steve gave his name and asked to see Mr. Penton. The latter came out into the hall a few seconds later.

"Good evening, boys. I was just on my way downtown to the post-office. You may walk along with me and tell me what I can do for you."

"We would rather speak with you here, sir, in private," answered Steve earnestly.

"Is it so important as that, my lad?"

"It is, sir."

"Come into the parlor," said Mr. Penton, leading the way and switching on the electric lights. "State your business as briefly as possible."

[120]

The superintendent seated himself, motioning the boys to be seated also.

"By chance, I overheard a conversation between you and the mine captain at chute seventeen the other day," said Steve. "I did not want to listen, sir, but I will confess that what you said impressed me so strongly that I took a deep interest in it."

"Conversation about what?" demanded Mr. Penton rather more sharply than was his wont.

"About a shortage in the ore. You said the mine count did not agree with the figures as reported from the head office, sir."

Mr. Penton gazed shrewdly at his callers. Then he rose, and, closing the door leading into the dining room, returned to his chair.

"Well, lads," he said. "Have you come to see me on this subject?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose you think you might be able to solve the mystery?" This was said smilingly.

"We have solved it, sir."

"*What?*"

"I said we have solved it; at least, enough of it to make the rest comparatively easy."

"You astound me beyond words. Will you be good enough to tell me then the cause of this shortage?" [121]

"Yes, sir; the fault lies with your tally-boards."

"That was my idea originally, but the mine captain assures me that he has careful tally-men on every board."

"I think he has very careful men there, sir. At least, they seem to me to be looking out for their own interests pretty carefully."

"You are making a most serious charge, Rush. Are you able to substantiate this?"

"I am, sir."

"Do so."

"Sub-level seventeen, to-day, as you will find by referring to your report sheet, has sixty tons to its credit."

"Wait a moment, Rush. My report sheet is in my desk in the library."

The superintendent left the room, returning with the report sheet. He ran down the page, placing his finger on a line, which he followed out to the margin.

"Your information is correct," he said, glancing up. "How do you happen to have these figures?"

"I have been watching the boards for two days."

"Indeed?" [122]

"Yes, sir. As a matter of fact, though the tally sheet shows sixty tons as having come from number seventeen sub-level, only forty tons were actually mined there to-day."

Mr. Penton gazed at Steve Rush, who had risen and was standing before the superintendent, erect, steady-eyed and calm.

"Again, my lad, I ask you how you come to be in possession of these figures?"

"My chum, Bob, here, got the figures from the drift to-day."

"Ah, I see. You had arranged the plan?"

"Yes, sir. Bob kept a very careful tally."

"Jarvis, were you absent from sub-level number seventeen at any time during the day?"

"No, sir, excepting at meal time."

"Are you positive enough of your own tally to be willing to swear to it?"

"I am, sir."

"Then you have rounded up the whole case. There is nothing more to be done—nothing more left for me to do except to act on the information you have furnished me, which I shall do at once."

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

"Certainly."

"If you have any reason to believe this will not fully account for the shortage, would it not be an excellent idea to have the other tally-men inspected?" [123]

Mr. Penton reflected.

"An excellent idea; yes, it shall be done. Tell me how the tally-man, Marvin, worked his end of the game. Although you have not explained that part of it, it goes without saying that he was in collusion with Spooner."

"Yes, sir; so I suspected from the first. I did not like his actions. He appeared to be watching everyone about him. That aroused my suspicion after hearing what I did when you and the mine captain were there. So I watched him without pretending to do so. In the meantime he had driven me away from the tally-boards while I was standing there looking at them. While watching him I distinctly saw the fellow juggle the pegs and give the Spooner contract credit for more loads than were then on the chute. I counted and kept track of the Spooner cars, so that I could check up

with Bob. You see, I wanted to make absolutely sure that I was right."

"And your figures tallied?"

"They did."

"Lads, you have done the company a great service. I have no doubt but that both of you will receive a substantial reward. Personally, I cannot find words to express my appreciation. You have relieved me from a very embarrassing situation. I shall show my appreciation in a more substantial manner in due time." [124]

"We do not wish to be rewarded, Mr. Penton," returned Steve. "We are working in the interest of the company that pays us our wages, just the same as we should expect men to serve us if we were employers."

"And you would find that you would be sadly disappointed in the rank and file, boys. When I said 'reward,' I did not mean exactly a money reward, although indirectly it will amount to the same thing. This company is not slow to recognize merit. It gives every man a chance to show what sort of stuff he is made of. If his is a low grade of ore, as we would term it in the mines, then he stays where he is, but if of a higher grade from which the finest steel is made, then the man goes on up as fast as he is fitted to hold higher positions. There is practically no limit to the positions to which young men in this company may aspire. Take, for instance, the present president of this mining company, who is now drawing a salary equal to that received by the President of the United States. How do you suppose he began his career?"

"I—I do not know, sir. I never heard," answered Steve.

"He began with a shovel in his hands, just the same as you did something like a week ago, and so did I, and so did the most of us who have risen to the higher positions. But to return to our subject, I will have the other tally centres investigated secretly." [125]

"It might be a good plan for you to have your captain watch the tally-board at level number seventeen to-morrow. He can do so by secreting himself in the skip shaft," suggested Steve.

"I think your suggestion is a good one. In the meantime, of course, you lads will be discreet—you will not mention what you have told me?"

"You may depend upon us, sir."

"Yes, I am aware of that. Come to see me to-morrow. I shall want to talk with you. Good night, lads."

CHAPTER XIII

STRAIGHTENING THE CROOKED ONES

A BRIEF investigation on the part of the mine captain on the day following verified all that the boys had told the superintendent. Watching the tally-board man from behind the partition that shut off the skip shaft, the captain saw the man falsify the tally of the ore cars, making it show a considerable excess of the actual amount of ore contained in each car.

At noon Marvin was summoned to the office of the superintendent and confronted with the facts. After a few minutes of stubborn denial, the rascal gave in and told the whole story. He was to share half of the amount thus gained with the man Spooner. Up to that time the two men had made a substantial rake-off six days in every week.

After the tally-man had made a clean breast of the steal the superintendent said:

"Go back to your post. You will receive further orders later in the day. But see to it that nothing is said to Spooner until I have seen him; then you two can talk and growl all you wish. You will have something to growl about, I promise you that. How long has this thing been going on?" [127]

"For six weeks, sir."

"How much have you cheated the company out of thus far?"

Marvin handed Mr. Penton a slip of paper on which he had made some figures while talking, after which the tally-man departed very much crestfallen.

Spoooner was the next man summoned, and the contractor passed the most uncomfortable hour of his life under Mr. Penton's shrewd questioning. Spooner had been a miner and his contracting was of only recent date. When he saw that the superintendent was in possession of all the facts, he admitted that he had been receiving pay for many tons a day more than he had delivered to the company.

Mr. Penton considered the matter for some moments, while the contractor stood before him twisting his hat nervously between his hands, now and then shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"What do you think I ought to do with a rascal like you?" finally demanded the superintendent.

"I'll give up my contract and go back to working in the drift."

"You will do nothing of the sort! You will keep on with your contract until you have paid back what you have robbed the company of, you and your partner in crime, Marvin. You are a fine pair. By rights I ought to send both of you to jail. Perhaps I may do that yet, but that will depend upon what officials higher up order me to do. For the present, however, you will engage to pay back what you have stolen; that is, unless you prefer to hand over the money in a lump." [128]

"I haven't that much money—I have no money."

"I thought not; therefore two thirds of the amount will be deducted from the money due you each week and one third from the wages of the tally-man."

Spooner essayed to speak, but the words seemed to stick in his throat. Finally he managed to mumble:

"All—all right, sir."

"But, mind you, no more of your thieving tricks, or I'll have you in the cooler before you realize it."

"All right, sir. I—I'd like to ask a question."

"Ask it."

"Who was the man who gave me away?"

"You ought to know better than to ask me that question. Frankly, it is none of your concern. We have been looking for this leak for some time, and we have found it. Had you possessed a grain of common sense you would have known that, sooner or later, you would have been checked up. You're checked. The interview is ended. Go back to work." [129]

"I'll *find* the man!" growled Spooner. "I'll find him if it takes all the rest of my life to do it, and when I do——"

"What then?" interrupted the superintendent, fixing stern eyes on the man before him.

"I'll tell him what I think of him," answered the contractor lamely, as he left the room.

All the other contract drifts had been found to be working regularly, so it was reasonable that the entire shortage might be charged to Spooner. As a matter of fact, this shortage tallied very closely with the figures that the tally-man had given to the superintendent.

When the contractor returned to his drift he was more subdued than any of his regular shift had ever before seen him. They could not understand the sudden change. There was one there, however, who did understand. That one was Bob Jarvis. Bob was leaning against the "shore" just outside of the vein the men were working. He was doing nothing in particular.

Some moments passed before Spooner discovered this.

"Get in there, you, before I shove you in! Get hold of a shovel! What do you think I'm paying you for? What are you trying to do—hold up the wall? The lagging will do that without your help. Get to work." [130]

"I am working," answered Bob coolly, making no effort to obey the order of the contractor.

"You are working, eh?"

"Yes."

"May I inquire what you are working at?"

"Yes, I'm working for the company. My particular business at this moment is watching you."

"Watching me?"

"Yes, sir; I am here to check you up. I am not working for you to-day. As I said, I am working for the company. Don't let me disturb you, sir. I'll try not to get in the way."

"Do you know why you are doing this?"

"Yes; because I am ordered to do so."

"Is that all you know?"

"It may be, and then again it may not be."

With a growl, Spooner turned and began to abuse his men, while Bob remained leaning against the wall, checking each car as it was filled.

In the meantime, when Marvin returned to his station on the level below, he stepped to the tally-board and relieved the man who had been placed there to act during the regular man's absence. [131]

As Marvin was looking over the boards Steve stepped up, touching him on the shoulder. The

tally-man's face flushed angrily.

"What do you want?"

"Merely to say to you that I have had orders to check you up, to see that you check every car properly."

"I won't stand it. I'll——"

Steve shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a matter with which I have no concern. You will have to fight that out with the superintendent. I shall obey my orders and it will be better for you, I should imagine, to submit without trying to make matters uncomfortable for me. I shall do what I have been told to do, just the same. When a train draws up you will plug only when you see that I am looking at the board, please. I'll dump the cars after you have done that and I shall know if you have moved the plugs when I am not looking."

Marvin's face twitched nervously, but he made no reply.

There was nothing of triumph in Steve's attitude. The lad was attending to business to the best of his ability. He discovered, after a time, that Marvin was watching him narrowly. As he watched, the tally-man's face grew blacker and blacker. [132]

"I wonder if he suspects?" thought Rush.

As a matter of fact, Marvin was beginning to see light. At noon the tally-man hurried away, after sulkily asking Steve to watch the tally-board. First, however, the man made a memorandum of the tally, so that Steve could not change it without Marvin's being aware of the fact. The lad pretended not to have observed this, but a quiet smile hovered about the corners of his mouth as he laid out his lunch on a clean, white napkin on the bench beside him.

Instead of going up in the cage, Marvin hastily climbed a ladder to the sub-level, where he waited for Spooner to come out.

"Well, what is it?" demanded the contractor in a surly tone.

"I've got wise to something. Where can we talk?"

"Come over in the drift here. There's no one near by."

The men slipped into a dead drift, extinguished their candles and engaged in earnest conversation.

Bob Jarvis' shrewd eyes had observed the actions of the men. He was sitting in the Spooner contract eating his lunch, but they had not noticed him.

"I wish I could find out what they are talking about," he muttered. "But I am not a spy. I don't know that I care particularly. I'll tell Steve, for I have an idea there is mischief in the air. There they go down the level." [133]

The two men climbed down the ladder to the main level. A few minutes later Steve saw Spooner alone, sauntering along the tracks. When the contractor reached the chute he halted, peering over at the lad as if he had just discovered him.

"Hello, Rush," he greeted, turning and coming over to where Steve was sitting.

"Good afternoon."

Spooner sat down on the bench, and, for a moment or two, nothing was said, Steve continuing with his lunch as indifferently as if the contractor had not been there.

"So you're the sneak who gave me away, are you?" demanded Spooner, turning upon the lad savagely.

Steve eyed the contractor calmly.

"Am I?"

"You are!"

"I may be the man, and in fact I will admit that I was instrumental in exposing your crookedness, but I am not a sneak. It strikes me that you have laid yourself open to being called one."

The man's face turned white with anger. He opened and closed his fingers, with difficulty restraining himself from fastening them upon the calm-faced boy beside him. Steve munched his food steadily, but he was watching the man narrowly. [134]

"I—I'll be even with you for that, you sneaking cur!" shouted Spooner. "Yes, I'll be even with you!"

"I wouldn't threaten, were I in your place. If anything should happen to me you might be accused, you know," answered Rush in a tantalizing tone. "What do you propose to do to me?"

Spooner leaped up and shook his fist under the Iron Boy's nose. The latter did not flinch.

"What do I propose to do to you? I'll tell you what I am going to do to you. I'm going to drive you out of this mine. I'll never stop till I've driven you off the range and out of the mine country. You'll never be able to get a day's work in a mine on this range after I get through with you, if nothing worse happens to you in the meantime. I'll——"

"It strikes me that you are pretty much in the same box yourself——"

"Oh, I wish you were a man! I wish you weren't a weak, baby-faced kid! I'd beat you to a pulp right——"

"Don't let that worry you, Spooner. Sail in, if you feel you have got to take it out of me. Perhaps you will feel better after you have vented your ugly temper on someone, even if it is a boy. Now get off from this platform!" commanded Rush, with a sudden change of tone, as he rose quickly to his feet. "You've got no business here, anyway. Get out!" [135]

Steve grabbed up the iron bar with which he dumped the cars and started for the contractor. He had no intention of using it on the man, but he did not wish to engage in a fight with the fellow, being pretty sure that he would get the worst of it, for Spooner was a large and powerful man. Therefore the Iron Boy chose what he considered to be the most effective way of ridding himself of the contractor's presence.

Spooner hesitated a moment, then began backing up, his face pale with rage, his fists clenched.

"You had better turn about and face the other way, unless you want to fall through the chutes," warned Steve.

Spooner turned with an exclamation. A second more and he would have fallen in and shot down to the level below. As it was, he was obliged to jump over the opening to save himself, landing on the other side of the track. There he paused and renewed his abuse of young Rush.

"I've had enough of your nonsense! Get out!" commanded the sturdy lad. He, too, leaped the chutes and made for the contractor, brandishing his iron bar. Spooner turned and ran down the level until he reached the ladder, up which he climbed to his own drift. [136]

"There, I guess I shall not be troubled by that fellow any more," said Steve, returning slowly to his interrupted lunch.

But he had not heard the last of Spooner.

The contractor, fuming with rage, was already plotting the downfall of the lad who had been the cause of his undoing.

CHAPTER XIV

LAYING THE TRAP

STEVE RUSH and his companion had held a long consultation over the events of the past few days. They had decided that it would be well to watch both Spooner and Marvin. Bob had overheard a conversation, or rather a few words, between the two men that warned him they were plotting mischief.

"What can they do?" asked Steve.

"If we knew, we should have no cause to worry," answered Bob.

"It is my opinion that they will put up some sort of job to waylay us outside one of these nights. Well, we shall be ready for them. Forewarned is forearmed, you know. If they try any such trick they'll find we are pretty well able to take care of ourselves, even if we are 'weak kids,'" said Rush, with a smile.

A number of weeks passed without incident. During that time Spooner and Marvin made good their stealings. They were then called to the office and both men were discharged. This occurred at the noon hour. They were told to go back to the mine, get their tools and clear out. When the men did return Steve and Bob Jarvis were eating their lunch up in the Spooner drift. [138]

"There are the cubs now," whispered Marvin, pointing to the end of the drift. "It's our chance."

"Is it safe?"

"As safe as it ever will be. If you haven't got the nerve to do it, I'll do it myself."

"I've got the nerve, all right, but I don't propose to put my neck in a halter. I'd rather come back at some other time and carry the thing through."

"Getting cold feet already?" jeered Marvin.

"Don't you talk to me like that, or I'll pound you right here and now. Nobody ever accused Bob Spooner of having cold feet without getting hurt."

"You talk like it. But never mind; I'll do it. I owe him one and I owe the mine more than one. They'll have something to settle and it'll cost them a pretty penny, I reckon. It's now or never, for you and me. We'll never get a better opportunity. How do you suppose we are going to get in here after we leave to-day? Why, they wouldn't let us inside the cage after the orders the big boss will give them at the top of the shaft."

"Stop it! I'll do the trick. Where are the tools, though? I haven't a saw in my kit."

"I know where there is one. I sneaked it from the boss timber-man yesterday after we had our talk. I hid it behind the lagging about half way down the drift there. Come with me; I'll get it for you." [139]

"Be careful," warned Spooner, peering around a bend in the drift at the two boys in the far end. From that distance he could see only their bobbing candles. "All clear. Hurry!"

Marvin reached to the top of the lagging at a certain point, and when his hand came away it held a saw.

"Here it is. Hurry, now!"

Spooner tucked the saw under his coat. This done, he moved along the drift away from the place where the boys were sitting, until he came to a slanting partition.

"There is a ladder inside. You know how to climb down it," whispered Marvin, as he cautiously opened a door in the partition. The interior was so dark that the men could see nothing. There was a sudden rush and some unseen object tore by them in the blackness. It was an ore skip, with its load of iron ore thundering to the surface. Its force was so great as to extinguish the candles of the two miners. Marvin quickly relighted them.

"Now get in and be lively. You will have to get away before the afternoon shift starts in, or you may get something down on your head." [140]

"You go down and stay on guard. If there is any danger, if anything turns up, stamp three times on the floor when there is no skip going by. Otherwise I shall not hear it."

"I'm wise. Good luck! We can't lose this time and we'll be even with the whole bunch for all time."

Spooner stepped inside the dark chamber, pulling the door cautiously shut after him. His long service in iron mines had given him an excellent knowledge of every foot of the mine he was then working in, and though in deep darkness, he was not at all uncertain in his movements.

The contractor was now in the large shaft through which the ore skips ran with their cargoes to the top of the shaft, where they emptied the ore into waiting trams which ran out over a trestle and dumped it on the pile where Steve Rush had begun his work when he first came to the Cousin Jack Mine. It was a dangerous place for one who was not wholly sure of himself, but Spooner descended the ladder confidently, making his way to the bottom, then down a short ladder to a platform that was directly beneath that on which the tally-man and the dumper in level seventeen stood when at their work. [141]

Reaching this platform, the contractor removed his candle from his hat, making a careful examination of his surroundings. His attention finally centred on a section of the flooring above. That particular part was held up by a post some three feet in length, the latter being supported by a two-inch plank laid across two other posts that protruded up through the floor of the lower platform.

"I wish those skips would get busy," muttered Spooner. "They'll hear the saw above there if I am not careful." Then it occurred to him that, it being the noon hour, the skips were not running regularly. With an exclamation of disappointment, the man stepped up to the main post and ran his hands over the plank that supported it.

"I guess this will be about the right spot," he decided, placing his saw about midway on the right-hand side of the post. Spooner took off his blouse, throwing this over the saw to deaden the sound. Then, holding a corner of the coat up by one hand that he might see what he was doing, he began drawing the saw rapidly across the plank. The latter being hard wood, his efforts were not productive of immediate results. But the saw slowly ate its way into the tough timber until at last the man withdrew it, and, holding his candle low, examined the cut he had made. [142]

"I think that will be enough for this side. I'll open up the other side a little," he muttered.

Spooner had just begun to saw when a sound somewhere above him caused the man quickly to extinguish his candle. He stood still and listened.

"What's this door doing unlatched?" demanded a voice, which the fellow recognized as belonging to the mine captain.

Spooner did not catch the reply.

"Somebody will be tumbling into the shaft, first thing you know, and then we shall have damages to pay."

"I reckon you'll have some to pay as it is," muttered the man below. "I hope this costs you a million!"

The door through which Spooner had entered the shaft was closed with a bang and he heard no more of the voice above him.

"I've got to look sharp or I'll be caught. I haven't had a signal from Marvin yet, so everything must be clear above us."

Once more the steady rasp of the saw began on the other side of the post, and a few minutes later the contractor used his candle to examine his work.

"I guess that will do the business," he chuckled. "And now I must be getting out of here lively." [143]

Instead of taking the saw with him, the fellow tossed it over to one side, then began climbing the ladder. Very soon he was at the door opening on to the sub-level where his contract had been located. Spooner opened it ever so little and listened. He could hear subdued voices. He opened the door a little wider, and, as he did so, Steve Rush and Bob Jarvis sauntered by.

"Keep your eyes open, old chap," was Bob's parting salutation.

"I will," answered Steve, starting down the ladder to his post.

Jarvis returned to the drift where he was working—Spooner's old place. This was the chance for the other man to get out of the shaft. He knew it was time for the afternoon shift to go to work, and just as he slid from the shaft and closed the door behind him the whistle blew the signal to resume operations. The contractor ran along the drift, gathering up his tools and starting down the same ladder that young Rush had taken.

Reaching the main level, the man took his time in going to the cage. At the bottom of the shaft he was joined by Marvin.

"Did you fix it?" whispered the latter. [144]

"Sh-h-h!" warned Spooner.

The men ascended to the surface without exchanging further words. Once in the open, however, Marvin said in a low tone:

"Tell me about it."

"It's done; it's all fixed."

"You think it will work?"

"I am sure of it."

"Then somebody's stock will go down, and I don't know as I care a rap whose it is."

"I don't think we'll have to guess far to know whose it will be," answered Spooner, with a grin.

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going over to Tracy to get a job. We can both get work there, but they haven't lost us yet. No, sir; the Cousin Jack has not done with you and me, by a long shot. We've got a few tricks left up our sleeves that will open their eyes. But we have made a mighty good start; yes, sir, a mighty good start."

Chuckling at his own villainy, Spooner hurried along, the other man by his side.

Steve and Bob had returned to their work at once. The former was now filling the place of the man Marvin at the tally-board, and at the same time dumping the cars. The two jobs kept him continually moving, but this Steve, true to his name, thoroughly enjoyed. He liked to be driving ahead every minute of the day. [145]

From the moment the whistle blew he was hard at work. He had no time to talk with the motor-man as he had before when dumping the cars, for he had to keep the number of cars and the drift or contractor in his mind while he was dumping them, and until he could jump back to the tally-board.

When night came Steve was ready to turn in. He confessed that he was tired. For one thing he felt no little relief, and that was that Spooner and Marvin were no longer in the employ of the company.

The next morning the boys went to work in high spirits. The shift had been at work something more than an hour, when the catch on one of the tram cars caught as Steve sought to release it, and resisted his efforts stubbornly.

"Smash it!" cried the motor-man. "I'm in a hurry."

"I'm going to," answered Steve.

Raising the iron bar above his head, he brought it down on the offending catch with all his strength. A crash followed and the ore shot down through the chute with the roaring sound of a cataract.

Instantly the second car was pushed over the chute.

"Get busy, there!" yelled the motor-man when he saw that no effort was being made to release the ore. [146]

He shouted several times, but there was no response from Rush.

"Where's that lazy bones?" he demanded, hopping from his motor and running around the end of the train. "What, what— Something's happened! Look!" shouted the motor-man, pointing to the platform.

Steve had disappeared. In the place where he had stood a moment before was a black hole about three feet square. Through this hole could be heard the thunder of the skips as they rushed back and forth at almost projectile speed.

CHAPTER XV

[147]

BORNE SKYWARD ON A SKIP

"H E'S gone through the hole! Call the captain! Where is he?"

"I saw him on the sub-level above a minute ago," cried a brakeman, running up the ladder to summon the mine captain.

The latter was on hand, it seemed less than a minute later, and behind him came Bob Jarvis.

"What is it?" shouted the captain before he had reached the scene.

"Tally-man and dumper gone down through the hole there."

The captain started in amazement.

"How did it happen?" he demanded excitedly.

"I don't know. He just went through, that's all."

"Who—who was it?" stammered Bob.

"Steve Rush."

Jarvis uttered a half articulate cry and began to let himself down into the opening. The mine captain grabbed him.

"You'll be killed," he said sternly, dragging the lad back to the platform. "You cannot help your friend by going through that way."

The captain opened the door leading into the skip shaft and ran down the ladder. His quick glance took in the broken-down supports, but what he did not see was that the planking beneath the post had been sawed part way through. There was no planking there to see. [148]

There were no signs of Steve on the platform below. The captain hurried back.

"Jarvis, run to the telephone on this level, and tell each level below to look for the body of a man who fell through the shaft."

Bob started on a run. Despite his pluck, Bob Jarvis was trembling from head to foot.

"He's dead, he's dead! *They've* done it. But how? No, it is impossible. They couldn't be to blame for that. It was an accident."

Word came back that there was no one in the shaft.

"Who opened the hole?" asked Bob.

"It is an old trap that has been closed for years. It simply caved in, that's all. Order the timbermen to put in a new piece and some fresh supports. Telephone to the top and find out if they have heard anything there."

No one seemed really to know what to do. All believed that Steve Rush had been dashed to death.

"Did—did he fall on a skip?" asked Bob in a trembling voice.

"I am afraid that is what has happened," replied the mine captain. "I am waiting to hear from the surface and if they have seen nothing of the body, we will examine the shaft all the way up." [149]

Bob groaned and, walking over, leaned heavily against the partition.

Steve's fall had been so sudden that he had no time even to utter a cry. The blow that he had given the catch on the tram car had been too much for the sawed support under the old trap. The support had collapsed under his weight and Rush had dropped through the opening.

He shot down feet first to the platform below, bounded off and dropped into the shaft itself.

Something caught and lifted him through the air at a frightful rate of speed. Steve had been

caught by the ore skip, and was being borne to the surface nearly two thousand feet above. The lad had by this time lost consciousness, for the shock when the skip caught him had been a heavy one. It seemed as if it must have broken every bone in his body.

On roared the skip with its human burden. The car shot out into the daylight, then darted up the fifty-foot shaft that towered above the opening to the mine.

Reaching the top, its burden of ore was dumped into a waiting tram car on the trestle, after which the skip dived down into the depths again. [150]

The dump-man on the trestle caught sight of something that was not ore falling into his car. Instead of starting the car along the trestle, he sprang up on the side board.

"I wonder what that was? It looked like a human being!" he exclaimed. Then his eyes caught sight of a piece of clothing. The man tugged at the cloth, but it did not give way.

"It's a man!" he shouted, clambering over on the car and beginning to dig frantically with his hands. "Stop the skips, *stop* them quick!"

But his warning came too late. A skip load of ore was dumped down on the loaded car, most of it sliding off to the ground fifty feet below. Enough remained, however, to bury the dump-man and the man he was trying to drag out.

But the dump-man was full of grit. He fought desperately and in a moment succeeded in pushing off the ore that held the body down. He was now working with frantic haste to get the other man out, knowing full well that the unfortunate one would be suffocated if he already were not dead.

By this time other men, attracted by the dump-man's cries, were scaling the trestle at a dozen different places. Among them was the superintendent himself, who, on his way to the dry house to put on his miner's suit preparatory to going below ground on his usual daily round, had heard the cry for help up on the trestle. The superintendent, despite his size, got to the top of the trestle ahead of any of the others and started on a run for the scene. [151]

"What's the trouble, Collins?" he shouted.

"Man thrown up on the skip, sir."

"Is he dead?"

"I can't say, sir. I think most likely he is."

"Who is it?"

"Don't know him, but he's a young 'un. He's pretty badly banged up, so far as I can see."

Superintendent Penton threw himself to the top of the ore car and assisted in getting the man out. At first he did not recognize the limp figure as being that of Steve Rush, for the red ore had been ground into the cut and bleeding face of the lad until he was almost unrecognizable.

"Send for the stretchers. This man must be gotten to the hospital on the jump!" shouted the superintendent.

The dump-man had lifted the boy from the car, had laid him down on the trestle and with his handkerchief was wiping the dark-red ore from the lad's mouth, eyes and nose.

"He's alive, sir," called Collins. "But I reckon he won't be for very long." [152]

Mr. Penton stepped over, after giving his orders, and looked keenly down into the pale face before him.

"What!" he exclaimed, bending close to the injured boy. "Good heavens, it's Steve Rush! This is too bad. How did it happen?"

"I don't know, sir. The first I knew about it he came out of the hopper kerflop. I jumped up to dig him out, and then I went kerflop with a load of ore on my back. Woof! It's lucky for me the car was full or I'd have been at the bottom of the heap."

Mr. Penton had picked Steve up in his arms. The burden seemed as nothing to this powerful man. And even when he reached the ladder leading down to the ground the superintendent appeared to experience no difficulty in making his way down with the heavy load he was carrying.

Steve was rushed to the hospital, followed by the superintendent himself. The lad was still unconscious. A hasty examination by the surgeon was made in the presence of the superintendent.

"Well?" Mr. Penton threw a world of meaning into the word.

"No bones are broken. There may be some internal injury. I should judge there might be, from the fact that he is bleeding at the mouth. What happened?" [153]

"He was thrown up by the skip. That's all I know about it now. I want to know whether or not the boy is going to die. Then I will find out how it happened."

After working over the unconscious boy for half an hour, the surgeon decided that there had been a severe concussion that might amount to a fracture. A few hours, he said, would tell the story.

"I'll be back within the hour. Let no efforts be spared to straighten the lad out, if it be possible."

Steve lay limp and pallid, his face almost as white as the sheets of the cot on which he had been placed, and there was a troubled look in the eyes of the big-hearted superintendent as he left the company's hospital and hurried to the shaft.

"Let me off at the seventeenth level," he directed, taking his place in the cage. A few minutes later found him at the chutes where the accident had occurred. Bob, pale-faced and anxious, had been placed at the tally-board and the work of the mine was going on much as usual.

"Please, Mr. Penton, is Steve badly hurt?" demanded the lad, running over to the superintendent the instant he saw him approaching. [154]

"I fear he is, my boy. How did the accident occur?"

"We hear he was carried up on the skip and dropped on the trestle."

"I mean what happened here?"

"The boy fell through the old trap there," explained the mine captain, approaching at that moment.

"Fell through the trap?" demanded Mr. Penton in surprise.

"Yes, the old trap that was closed several years ago. The men are fixing it so a similar accident won't occur again."

"Tell me exactly what happened."

"I didn't see it. The motor-man there can tell you. He is just coming in now."

The motor-man explained that young Rush was hammering at the dump-car catch when the trap gave way beneath him and he went down. That was all that anyone below ground knew about the accident. In fact, that was all there was to tell so far as any one in the mine knew.

Mr. Penton looked grave. It was an accident that reflected on him, for the corporation looked to him to make the mine safe. He was greatly disturbed, but more on Steve's account than on his own.

The superintendent climbed down into the skip shaft and made an examination on his own account. [155]

"Where are the supports that held up the trap?" he demanded upon his return to the platform.

"If they ain't there we must have thrown them into the shaft," explained the timber-man.

"You should have known better than that. Was it a break?"

"It was a break, all right. The thing just gave out, and that's all there was to it. But you can bet this one won't give way, not in a thousand years. It'll be here long after the old mine has caved in."

Mr. Penton did not go on with his inspection of the mine that day. He was too full of anxiety for Steve Rush. Bob had begged to be let off for the afternoon, and Mr. Penton had willingly granted his request. The lad hurried to the hospital, after having changed his clothes, and at his earnest request he was allowed to sit beside Steve. The boy could scarcely keep the tears back as he gazed down into the pale face of his companion. Bob was sure in his own mind that Steve was dying and Jarvis' eyes were large and sorrowful as he watched the surgeon working over the unconscious patient.

Mr. Penton came, remained a short time, then went away; he, too, convinced that Rush could not recover. Night came on, but still Bob sat beside the hospital cot, one hand slipped under the sheet clasping a hand of his companion. [156]

"You had better go home," said the surgeon, seeming for the first time to be aware of Jarvis' presence.

Bob did not answer.

"I said, you had better go home, Jarvis."

"I want to stay," answered the boy simply.

"You can do him no good."

"When will he get better—or worse?"

"I do not look for any change before three o'clock in the morning or thereabouts, so you see it will be useless for you to remain."

"All right; I am not sleepy," and Bob turned his face toward the cot, again fixing his gaze on the face of the unconscious Steve.

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders and proceeded with his duties. The hours dragged along, but Bob never changed his position nor even moved, so fearful was he of doing something that might

retard his friend's recovery. Three o'clock came and still there was no change. Another half hour elapsed. The sky was graying in the east. Steve uttered a low moan. The surgeon was at his side in an instant. He placed an ear to the boy's heart, then took his pulse, watch in hand. Bob's eyes were fixed on the surgeon now. The latter shut his watch with a snap, then noting the pleading question in the watcher's eyes, he nodded.

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"He is better. The change is coming, and unless something unlooked for occurs he should return to consciousness soon."

Bob drew a short, quick breath that was half a sob, settling down into his former watchful position.

Now the surgeon remained by the side of the cot. Occasionally he would administer a few drops of medicine. When the patient choked a little and swallowed, the surgeon would nod approvingly.

All at once Steve Rush's eyelids fluttered open. His gaze was fixed for a brief instant on the face of his companion. Jarvis held his breath.

"Bob," murmured the lad, then closed his eyes wearily.

CHAPTER XVI

[158]

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE SHAFT

"THE crisis has passed," announced the surgeon in a relieved tone.

Two great tear drops rolled down Bob Jarvis' cheeks. He brushed them away and rose from the chair in which he had been sitting all night.

"I'm going home. I must get ready to go to work. If he should become worse won't you please let me know?"

"Yes," answered the surgeon, giving the boy a quick, keen glance. "He'll be all right now. No need to worry."

Bob went to his boarding place happier and more light of heart than he ever had been before.

Steve's recovery was very slow, however. All that day and the next he was too weak to talk, having lost considerable blood. Then again the shock had been greater than many men could have sustained and lived to tell about.

At the end of a week the invalid was allowed to sit up, but ten days had elapsed before it was considered prudent to permit him to dress and walk about. Bob spent all his evenings with his companion, but they did not discuss the accident. Each lad tacitly avoided the subject.

[159]

The first day that Rush was allowed to go out of doors he walked over to Mr. Penton's office, a hundred yards away, and asked permission to see the superintendent. Mr. Penton welcomed the young man warmly.

"I am glad to see you out, Rush. You had a pretty close call, didn't you?"

"I guess so, though I do not remember much about what happened beyond a certain point."

"If you feel strong enough I wish you would tell me exactly what occurred leading up to the accident," said the superintendent.

"Oh, yes, sir; I am strong enough. I could go to work and I think I shall to-morrow."

"We'll see about that."

Steve related briefly what he knew of the accident, but his story shed no new light on the affair. He could not even guess how it had happened, beyond what Mr. Penton himself told the boy.

"There is one thing I should like to do, sir," said Steve.

"And what is that?"

"I wish you would give me permission to examine the shaft where I fell in."

"That already has been done. Something gave way, and——"

Steve smiled faintly.

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"I have reason to know that something gave way," he said. "I wish I could satisfy myself, though, just how it happened."

"Of course. There is no objection to your doing so."

"I will ask Bob Jarvis to help me. He is a shrewd boy, and he may see some things that I might not notice."

"He will have to be pretty keen if he does," laughed Mr. Penton. "I cannot imagine much of anything escaping your observation. But, my lad, you have some reason for wanting to do this. What is it?"

"I want to find out how the accident occurred."

"Ah, you suspect something?"

"I do not know whether I do or not. Perhaps I am curious. Most boys have some curiosity, you know, sir."

"Go ahead, but do not try it until you are well and strong. We can't afford to have you laid up again. We need you, you know."

A faint flush stole into Steve Rush's face. He had grown to be very fond of the big-bodied, big-hearted superintendent of the Cousin Jack Mine in the few months that he had known him.

"I thank you, sir. You are very kind to me. I want to tell you how much I appreciate it all."

"Rubbish!" scoffed Mr. Penton.

[161]

On the third day following, Steve made his first trip below ground since the accident. The lad was welcomed with enthusiasm by nearly every one he met, many of whom he knew only by sight.

"I never knew I was so popular," smiled Steve, after he had looked up Jarvis, who was still at work at level seventeen.

Bob grinned.

"I reckon there are certain quarters where you are not so popular, eh?"

"I should not be surprised if that were true. But those quarters no longer exist, I understand."

"Yes; the pair have hit the trail over the mountains. What are you going to do down here to-day?"

"I am going down in the skip shaft."

Jarvis nodded understandingly.

"Mr. Penton said you might knock off and go with me."

"Did he? That's fine. I'll see the mine captain and tell him."

"I have told him already. You may come with me now, and we'll make a little examination on our own hook."

Bob dropped his shovel, and, telling the shift boss where he was going, accompanied Steve down the ladder to the level below. There the lads looked over the platform by the tally-board, Steve pointing out where he was standing when he went through the floor.

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"I never knew there was a trap there," he said, pointing to the new planking that covered the hole through which he had dropped.

"Nor I. I guess not many men in the mine knew about it. The timbers supporting it must have been rotten."

"Perhaps," answered Steve dryly. "Come on up to the sub-level; we will begin our investigation there."

Bob followed, though he did not fully understand the purpose of his companion. Rush made his way to the door on the sub-level through which the man Spooner had entered the shaft. The lad opened the door and stood peering in, holding his candle ahead of him as he did so.

"You are not going in here, are you?" questioned Jarvis.

"Yes."

"Why not go in on the level below and save this climb?"

"I have my reasons, old man. Do you see the red mud on the rungs of the ladder here?"

"Yes, I see it; but what does that prove?"

"No one has any business in this shaft and yet someone has been here rather recently, for the mud is still soft. That mud came from some one's rubber boots not so many moons ago."

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"You ought to be a detective," exclaimed Bob admiringly.

"We will go down now. Be careful. This isn't a very safe place, and a misstep would take you to the surface by the route I followed two weeks ago."

Once on the platform below, the boys halted. Holding their candles above their heads, they looked about them curiously. A new post had been set in place of the old one, the latter still lying on the platform. This the boys examined carefully.

"You see, the post is in good condition, Bob. The post didn't give way, after all. I wonder how it was held up?"

"Perhaps it rested on a piece of wood placed across these two posts that project up through the floor," suggested Bob.

"Yes, that's so. I think you are right. But where is the piece? I should like to see it."

Steve was hunting here and there with his customary energy, while Bob Jarvis stood looking on, not being quite sure what he should do.

"You look about on that side, Bob. Be careful that you don't fall into the shaft. Here is sawdust on the floor, but I presume the men did that when they put in the new support. Hello! I've got something." [164]

Steve triumphantly held up a saw that he had found.

"This may mean something and it may not. We shall find out when we get back again."

Suddenly the boy uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" demanded Bob, hastening over to the spot where Steve was pulling something from between the platform and the rock wall of the shaft. What he had found was a piece of plank from which two pieces had been split off. At the breaking point on each end they plainly saw the cut of a saw.

"Well, what do you think of that?" muttered Bob. "Is that the plank that held up the post?"

"Judging from the mark in the middle, I should say it was. Bring the old post over here."

Bob did so, and at Steve's direction placed the end of the post on the broken piece of plank. The post fitted the faint outline perfectly.

"Well, what do you think of that?" breathed Jarvis.

"That somebody has tried to make a clean job of getting me out of the way. That plank was sawed partly through so that it might not break at once, but would do so when any extra weight was thrown upon it. We must find those other pieces, Bob. Look about. I guess we'll have something to report to Mr. Penton."



Steve Triumphantly Held Up a Saw.

"Shall we say who did it?"

"We can't really say. We may have our suspicions, but unless we get more evidence we shall have to let it go as it is. I have some facts in my possession that may help us, though."

Steve got down on his hands and knees and began going over the floor with great thoroughness. He was keen and alert and his eyes glowed with resolute purpose.

"Here's one of the broken pieces," cried Bob.

"Good. See if you can find the other. We shall have our case complete in a few minutes if we keep on having such good luck."

But one piece was all that Bob was able to find, the other no doubt having been thrown into the shaft. The one found was lying at the edge of the platform near its end.

"I guess there is nothing more here for us to do," decided the lad finally. "We will take our

evidence and go to Mr. Penton."

"We haven't enough to hang a dead cat on."

Steve smiled.

"We shall see," he answered. "You tuck the saw under your coat and I will carry the boards."

Entering the first cage that stopped at this level, the boys were quickly conveyed to the surface. Steve asked the cage-tender at the mouth of the shaft if he had seen the superintendent about the shaft, and was informed that Mr. Penton was at that moment in the dry house. He was no doubt dressing to go down in the mine. [168]

The boys hurried to the dry house, finding Mr. Penton talking with one of the time-checkers.

"May we see you alone, sir?" asked Steve.

"Certainly. Come into my dressing room. You have some news, eh?" queried the superintendent, flashing a keen glance at them.

"We think we have, sir."

After entering the dressing room, Mr. Penton nodded for them to proceed. Steve went right to the point.

"We have been down in the skip shaft."

"On seventeen platform?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you discover anything of consequence?"

"Mr. Jarvis has a saw that we found there. It belongs to one of the timber-men, and was stolen from him the day before the accident."

The superintendent pricked up his ears at this.

"I learned that fact this morning. He doesn't know that we have the saw. We found it where it had evidently been thrown by the person who used it. And here is something else, sir."

Steve laid the broken pieces of plank on a table. Mr. Penton picked them up, turning them over in his hands, pausing when he discovered the marks of the saw, then he glanced at Steve. [169]

"What is this?"

"It is the support that rested under the post holding up the old trap," answered the lad.

"Then—then—"

"Someone had sawed it partly through, so the support would give way and let someone else down. I happened to be the one who was let down."

The smile vanished from the eyes of the general superintendent and the lines of his face hardened perceptibly.

"How do you know this piece supported the post?"

"You will find the mark of the post on it. We fitted the post to the mark to make sure. Whoever did the job, entered the skip shaft from sub-level seventeen. I am sure of this, because I found fresh mud on the rungs of the ladder. No one is supposed to go down there, is he, sir?"

"No; no one does go down there. This is very serious. Why did not my men discover all these things?"

"I guess they did not look very sharply. The evidence was there to be found if one looked hard enough."

"Rush, you suspect someone?" said Mr. Penton sharply. "Whom do you suspect?" [170]

"Perhaps this may answer the question," answered the lad, laying on the table a brass time check about the size of a half dollar.

"Where—where did you get this?"

"On the platform where the job was done, sir," answered Steve, directing a steady gaze at the stern face of the superintendent.

CHAPTER XVII

THEIR FIRST PROMOTION

"WAIT a minute," said Mr. Penton, hurrying across the hall to the office of the time-keepers.

He was gone but a few moments and when he returned there was a look on his face that Steve had never seen there before. It was a look that meant trouble for someone. The superintendent sat down, gazing out of the window at the towering shaft of the Cousin Jack Mine.

"You did not answer my previous question. I asked you whom you suspected."

"I dislike to make so serious a charge against anyone, sir, but a certain man was seen standing near the door leading down to the platform the day before I fell in. Two persons saw him."

"Who was the man?"

"The man was Spooner, sir."

"You are sure of that?"

"Sure of it according to my information."

"Well, lad, this is Spooner's time check that you have brought to me," replied Mr. Penton in an impressive voice.

"I reckon that evidence would hang a live cat," muttered Bob Jarvis.

"Yes, it is sufficient evidence to warrant my looking up the man and lodging a complaint against him. Was he alone when he was seen at the door of the shaft, or don't you know?" [172]

"Marvin was with him, sir."

"Ah! Rush, you have done well. You are a very shrewd young man. In fact, I am proud of both of you. When we have anything of this sort on hand again I shall get you to investigate it. However, I do not believe there is another man in the mine who is wicked enough to attempt the life of a boy. There is another matter that I have had in mind for some time. That is, your advancement. You have learned fast. You already know more about the mine and its operation than a number of men who have spent the greater part of their lives below ground."

"Thank you, sir. We have tried to improve our opportunities."

"You have done so. You have done the company a great service in finding the place where the shortage occurred. I have already expressed myself on this point. After receiving my report in that case, the president of the company wrote me to reward you as I saw fit. I shall do so by promoting you. It is not much of a promotion, but it will give you an opportunity to acquaint yourselves the better with the mine and its operations. I now appoint you two boys inspectors of tracks. Your duties will be to see that the tram tracks are in perfect condition. It will keep you busy, for there are a good many miles of track in the Cousin Jack. You, Rush, will take the east half and Jarvis the west. That will take you both well over the mine. It would be simpler to divide your territory by levels, but I consider the former plan the better one for your own good. You will require some technical information that the engineer will give you. He also will supply you with maps of the trackage, which you will study carefully." [173]

"I am very grateful," breathed Steve, his eyes lighting up.

"You're welcome, lad. I want to push you along as fast as you are ready, but you must not expect to go too fast."

"I think I have done very well as it is, sir."

"Your pay will be two dollars a day."

Twelve dollars a week! It was more money than either of the boys ever had earned before. To them it seemed a large sum of money. They were very happy and proud. Their new work was to begin on the following morning. Jarvis went back to finish his day at drifting in ore, while Steve returned to his boarding place, where he sat down and wrote a long letter to his mother, telling her of his good fortune.

In the meantime Mr. Penton set an inquiry on foot to locate Spooner and Marvin. The men had applied for work in a neighboring mine, he learned, but had failed to get employment there. Neither man had been seen in those parts since. Mr. Penton decided that they had left the range, and he was thankful for it, as it relieved him of an unpleasant duty. However, that day he made a detailed report to the president of the mining company by letter, giving the boys full credit for what they had discovered. Mr. Penton also made report of the promotion he had given them. This was afterwards heartily endorsed by President Carrhart. [174]

Early the next morning the boys went over the mine with an assistant engineer. He gave them a long talk on tracks, Steve asking many questions as they went along. That afternoon the Iron Boys began their work, having laid out a certain number of levels that were to be visited each day. As Mr. Penton had told them, their new position took them to nearly every part of the mine, from the lowest working level to the tram tracks on the surface and far up on the trestle.

By the time that they had been at their new work for several months, each lad had proved that he was worthy of the confidence placed in him by the general superintendent.

Steve had been figuring on a problem in his department for a long time, and one day he went to [175]

the superintendent with it, or rather to learn whether the problem were a problem at all.

"I want to ask, Mr. Penton, if the expense of keeping up your motors that draw the dump cars in the mines is very great."

"I should say it is," was the prompt answer. "You see, they draw very heavy loads. Those cars of ore are not light."

"I am well aware of that. You will remember that I had a load dropped on me once," smiled Steve.

"We wear out, I should say, on an average of six motors a year. That runs into money. And the repairs on them, in the meantime, are very expensive."

"Would any arrangement that would tend to lessen the strain on the motors be of advantage to the company?"

"That is self-evident. Of course it would. What is more, relieving the cars of the strain to which they are subjected would save a few thousand dollars a year. Have you something in mind?"

Mr. Penton smiled good-naturedly on the young man who was standing before him.

"Yes, sir, I have a plan by which I think you ought to be able to save your electric motors considerably and at the same time make greater speed in getting ore to the chutes." [176]

"If you have a practical plan for doing that you will have accomplished a great deal, young man. What is your plan?"

"Well, sir, it is an engineering problem. Not being an engineer, I perhaps shall not be able to overcome all the difficulties in the way. I can tell you, though, what I think would help."

"Do so."

"I find that in most of the levels there is a considerable up grade to the chutes where the tram cars are dumped."

"That is a fact."

"Would it not be much better to have the loaded cars run down grade to the chutes? Then they would go back up the grade empty," suggested Steve half hesitatingly.

Mr. Penton gazed at him quizzically.

"Do you know, my boy, you have made a suggestion that even the keenest of our engineers evidently never have thought of?"

"I am glad if I have suggested something worth while," said Steve, with a pleased smile.

"But how do you propose to go about it? The levels are made and the tracks are laid to fit the conformation. How are you going to get over that condition?" asked the superintendent, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"As I told you, I am not an engineer." [177]

"But you have an idea?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's hear it."

"I have watched the trackmen grading on the railroad and I do not see why you cannot do the same thing here. You have plenty of waste dirt and rock in the mine. It is being taken out every day. Why not utilize some of it in raising the tracks at the 'rises'? That would give the cars a good start and the electric motor would not have to wear itself out getting the cars started. Continue doing this, even if you have to begin cutting the level lower down by the chutes. I am sure that that feature could easily be overcome by your engineers. In the sub-levels and new drifts you could do the same thing."

"How?"

"Cut down to them, sir, when you are drifting in. I want you to know that this is not wholly my idea. My friend Bob, in discussing the track question with me, said it was a pity that the motors had to haul their loads up hill in most instances. I got to thinking over this and out of it all came the plan I have proposed, so you see he is the one who is really entitled to the credit."

"The credit is yours. Rush, you've a great head on that slender body of yours, and it isn't so slender, at that, judging from the ease with which you picked up a rail one day last week and laid it in place." Mr. Penton laughed. "No; not so slender as it might seem to one who did not know you. This is really a very important matter. It is a matter that I shall have to take up with the main office at Duluth. I have an idea that they will adopt your suggestion without very much delay," said Mr. Penton. [178]

"Yes, sir."

"The engineering department reports that the inspection of tracks has never been done so thoroughly and intelligently as since you and Jarvis have been on the work. This naturally pleases

me very much. It shows me that my estimate of you was correct. Have you anything else to suggest?"

"No, sir; I think not. I think that will be about enough for to-day."

The superintendent agreed with him and Steve went back to his work. Bob Jarvis was quickly acquainted with what the superintendent had said, much to the latter's gratification. In due time, the plan having been passed upon by the company's engineers at the home office, word was received at the mines that it had been adopted. The young men who had suggested it were highly commended, President Carrhart adding in his letter to Mr. Penton:

"I knew that boy Rush couldn't help but do something, with a name like his." [179]

The work was put in progress as soon after that as the plans could be worked out, bearing in mind that the operation of the mine must not be interfered with. It may be imagined with what keen interest Steve Rush and Bob Jarvis watched the changing of the grades. They were also interested in another direction, when, one pay day soon after, they found that their salaries had been raised to fifteen dollars a week each.

Bob declared he felt like a millionaire.

"What are you going to do with all that money?" asked Steve.

"I think I shall buy some of the company's stock," answered Jarvis.

"Not a half bad idea. That is what I am going to do when I get money enough. As it is, I am sending home most of what I earn. But the money is in good hands," he smiled.

"Mine's in the bank. I am getting four per cent. interest on it, but I haven't got to where I can live on the interest I receive from it. I was figuring the other night, and at the present rate it will be twenty years before I shall be able to live on my income—my interest, I mean."

"Well, I don't want to live on my income. I want to be up and doing something as long as I've got a kick left in me. Cheer up, Bob, you may be a millionaire yet." [180]

"Yes; when I have long, yellow whiskers, maybe," laughed Jarvis.

In the course of two months the new system was working to the satisfaction of everyone. Already it was being applied to the other mines belonging to the company, and even at that early day it was apparent that the Rush Gravity System, as it was called, was destined to prove a great saving to the company. The name, too, was considered unusually appropriate.

One day, a few months later, as Steve was on his rounds, he caught sight of a man in miner's costume who instantly attracted his attention. The man was rather tall and wore a full beard. Rush stopped and gazed after the fellow until he passed out of sight.

"I wonder who he is?" muttered Steve. "There is something about him—about the way he folded his hand over his mouth, that is unpleasantly familiar to me."

On the day following, while Steve was chatting with one of the shift bosses on the twelfth level, he saw the fellow again.

"Who is that man?" asked the boy sharply, pointing to the one who had attracted his attention.

"His name is Klink—John Klink." [181]

"What does he do?"

"He is acting as a drift inspector at present, I believe."

"Klink?" mused the lad. "I don't think I ever heard the name before. Do you know where he comes from?"

"I think he comes from the San Juan Mine, over on the McCormick range. I don't know anything about him, but he seems to know his business pretty well. He is inspecting temporarily. The inspector whose place he is taking is at home sick. Klink is a boss miner."

"I must have been mistaken," thought Rush, as he proceeded along his route inspecting the tracks on that level. "But I can't get it out of my mind that I have seen the fellow somewhere before, and under unpleasant circumstances, at that."

He had, and at no distant day, he was destined to see the man under still more unfavorable circumstances.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VISIT OF THE OFFICIALS

FOR a week past there had been a great deal of work done in the Cousin Jack in the way of cleaning up and putting things in the best possible shape. The mine was to receive visitors. The annual inspection by prominent officials of the company was to be made, and the visitors might be looked for now on almost any day.

It was understood, also, that several New York officials were to be in the party, and every department head in the mines was ordered to leave nothing undone to have all things under his charge in perfect order.

"We are about the only ones whose work won't show," complained Jarvis.

"Why not, Bob?" demanded Steve.

"Why, a track is a track, that's all. It doesn't show all the work we have put on it. They'll just walk along on our job while they are admiring the other fellow's work."

"I think you are in error. The officials of these big corporations are all practical men. Most of them have had personal experience; some of them have not. I don't know about the New Yorkers, but I know Mr. Carrhart has been all through the mill. He will notice everything; you see if he doesn't." [183]

Three days after this conversation the visitors arrived. The Iron Boys were engaged in other parts of the mine and did not know of the arrival. Along in the early afternoon, however, their duties led them to the seventeenth level. Of course they were on opposite sides of the mine, but as it chanced each was heading for the chutes on that level, where their patrol would end. After a time a bobbing candle appeared far down the level. A moment later another appeared coming from the opposite direction.

Two young men came swinging along the tracks. Their step was springy and there was an alertness about them that at once attracted the observing ones. These two were Steve Rush and Bob Jarvis. They approached each other rapidly and waved their hands in greeting.

"Bob, there are the visitors," said Steve in a low tone.

"Oh, that's so; I hadn't noticed them. When did they come in?"

"I do not know. I had not seen them before."

Eight or ten men were assembled on the platform where the tally-board was located. The superintendent was holding an earnest conversation with them, the visitors keeping up a running fire of questions and comment. They had been through part of the mine and were discussing conditions and proposed improvements. [184]

The boys had matters of their own to discuss, so they gave little attention to the gathering, so far as the latter observed. But the lads were interested, just the same.

"I suppose most of those fellows are millionaires," said Bob, indicating the group by a jerk of his thumb in their direction.

"They are not fellows, Bob; they are gentlemen," corrected Rush.

"How do you know they are?" came back the quick question.

"It is reasonable to suppose they are. I know one of them is, for I have met him."

"Who is that?"

"Mr. Carrhart, president of the company."

"They all look like miners to me. Put a shovel in their hands and they wouldn't be at all different from us. But we mustn't be standing here doing nothing. While we are here, let's take a look at the tracks over the chutes. There is a rail a little down at the heels. I shall have to report it as dangerous. Getting a car off here blocks the whole line. I wonder when that edge broke down. It was all right when I inspected it yesterday."

Steve took out his memorandum book and made a note of the condition of the rail for immediate report to the engineering department. [185]

While the boys were thus engaged some of the party stood looking in their direction.

"Mr. Penton, who are those young men standing over yonder?" asked Mr. Carrhart.

"They are my track inspectors. They are a pair of likely young fellows. I'll wager there isn't a another pair of their age on the range that can equal them."

At this every one of the party turned to look at the Iron Boys, who, all unconscious of the attention they were attracting, were busy with their work.

"The chances are they do not even know you gentlemen are here, so attentive are they to their work."

"Who are they, Penton? I am interested in these prodigies," laughed Mr. Carrhart.

"The taller of the two is Robert Jarvis. The other is Steve Rush, after whom the Rush Gravity

System is named. You will remember, Rush suggested the change to the gravity system."

"Steve Rush?" exclaimed the president. "Why, I was going to ask you about the young man. I wish to talk with him, and the boy Jarvis, also. Rush is my find, you will remember, Penton."

"I was congratulating myself that I was his discoverer," laughed the superintendent. [186]

"No, you will remember my sending him up to you with a letter. You know I saw that he had good material in him. He was a live wire, even then."

"I give way; the honor is yours," answered Mr. Penton.

The party was in great good humor.

"If you can spare your young friends from their duties, for a few moments, I should like to speak with them."

"Surely. Rush!"

"Yes, sir."

The lad straightened up, touching his cap immediately.

"Will you step over here, please?"

Steve strode across the tracks.

"Jarvis, you, too."

"Yes, sir."

"How are you, Rush?" exclaimed President Carrhart, stepping forward and extending a cordial hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Carrhart. I am afraid my hand is not shakeable. It is grimy with red ore."

"We will shake all the same, lad."

They did so, the president holding to Steve's hand as he gazed keenly into the manly face of the boy, Steve returning his gaze, respectfully but steadily. [187]

"I am glad to see you, Rush."

"Thank you, sir. And I want to thank you also for giving me the opportunity that you did. This is my companion, Bob Jarvis."

The superintendent stepped forward at that juncture, presenting the boys to each member of the party in turn. There were vice-presidents, secretaries and directors—more titles than the boys could remember. To their surprise these big men greeted them as if they were equals.

"I hear you already have made a record for yourself, Rush," said Mr. Carrhart.

"I don't know about that, sir. I am just beginning to realize that I have a lot to learn."

"I hear also that you have had some exciting experiences. You must learn to safeguard yourself, and remember another thing, make your mine safe for your men and you will always get results. You and your friend are in charge of the tracks?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am pleased to see them in such splendid condition. It is almost like riding on a rock-ballasted railroad, they are so smooth."

Bob threw his shoulders back ever so little as he heard this.

"My, but those fellows must have eyes all around their heads the way they take things in," muttered Jarvis. "No wonder they are millionaires! They can see what the fellow behind them is doing as well as they can what's going on in front. You can't beat that kind of a game." [188]

"I hope he doesn't see that turned rail there over the chute," thought Rush.

"I noticed only one bad rail in the entire system, the one there by the chute. I see you have caught that, however."

"Well, what do you think of that?" muttered Bob under his breath. "I never heard anything like it."

"Yes, sir; but that rail has gone bad within the last twenty-four hours. It was in apparently good condition yesterday. Perhaps I did not examine it closely enough on my last inspection, though."

"No; you can't avoid those things now and then. There might have been a defect in the steel, a blow hole or something of the sort. The principal thing is not to let them get away from you. Catch the deterioration in time, before it causes more trouble—that is all we can expect of you. Gentlemen, this is the young man who invented our gravity system. Perhaps you heard the superintendent speak of it just now. And, let me tell you, he will bear watching. One of these days, if you do not keep your eyes open, he is likely to be found sitting in the chair of one of the [189]

other of you, either in Duluth, or Pittsburgh, or New York."

The gentlemen joined in Mr. Carrhart's laugh, much to Steve's embarrassment, though one would have never known, by looking at him, that he was experiencing any such emotion.

"You are doing well, very well; but do not be in too big a hurry and don't get a swelled head. It is fatal to progress."

"No, sir. If it does not get smashed, I am sure I shall be able to keep it from swelling," replied Steve, with a faint smile, bringing a laugh from the assembled company.

"Where did that accident occur?" asked the president, turning to Mr. Penton.

"Right where Mr. Gary is standing now."

The gentleman referred to, a vice-president of the company, promptly stepped back, glancing at the floor almost apprehensively. This brought another laugh from the visitors.

"Come here, gentlemen," said Mr. Carrhart, "and I will show you where this young man fell in. I do not think we should be alive now had we been through that experience."

The president threw open the door leading into the skip shaft. The others had stepped up to him, but as the skips thundered past them, leaping for the surface, faintly outlined monsters as they shot by, the members of the party instinctively drew back, casting wondering glances at the keen-faced boy who stood calmly, almost indifferently, looking into the shaft. [190]

Mr. Carrhart was explaining to them how the accident had occurred.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Cary. "I think I should prefer to be run over by a touring car on Broadway."

"And so should I," chorused the others, with the exception of Mr. Carrhart, who smiled grimly.

A lunch had been prepared for the guests and they were to eat in the mine, on the platform by the tally-boards and the chutes. Tables were being set, and by the time the visitors had turned away from the shaft opening they were invited to be seated on the benches drawn up for the purpose.

Steve and Bob stood talking with Mr. Carrhart, the president asking many questions.

"Come, Carrhart," called one of the others.

"I will be with you in a moment. Don't wait for me. Rush, how would you like to come to headquarters at the end of your year in the mines?"

"You mean to take a position there?"

"Yes."

[191]

The lad reflected for a moment.

"Would you advise me to do that, sir?" questioned Rush, looking Mr. Carrhart squarely in the eye.

"So you are putting it up to me, are you, you young rascal?" laughed the president.

"You know best, sir."

"The question is, would you like to come into the offices?"

"I am afraid I should not be worth much there. I think, sir, that I like the activity of this life better, so long as you have asked me. It is a rough, hard life, but I am happy here and I hope to learn the business so well that in time I shall be fit for a higher position."

"I don't think there is any doubt about that, my lad. By all means remain here. I shall have an eye in your direction, as I have had ever since I sent you up here. Good afternoon, boys; the gentlemen are waiting for me."

While this conversation was in progress an Italian was making his way down level seventeen. Over his back he carried a bag, the ends of which, fashioned into a loop, had been fastened in front of him, passing around his neck. The fellow was plodding half sleepily along, his boots slopping in the water beside the track as he staggered under his heavy burden.

When near the chute a man suddenly appeared behind him, paused an instant, then walked swiftly away. A few seconds more and the Italian appeared passing the chute. [192]

"Look!" exclaimed Bob. "Great goodness! Look at that!"

Steve Rush did look. One look was enough. With a sudden exclamation he sprang for the slow-moving Italian, leaping the chutes at the risk of his life. The lad knew that the lives of every man there were in peril. By quick work only could he save them, and perhaps not then.

BOB JARVIS was after him with a bound.

The lads had seen a little tongue of flame creeping up the sides of the bag on the back of the Italian.

Mr. Penton saw it also, as did the president of the company. The two men understood the situation as fully as did the lads themselves, but the others of the company were laughing and chatting, unmindful of the dire peril that was threatening them. Mr. Carrhart and Mr. Penton half rose from their seats, their faces blanching noticeably.

Steve by this time had reached the Italian burden-bearer. Stretching forth his hands, he grasped the bag, giving it a powerful tug. The Italian toppled over backwards, the loop slipping over his head, leaving the sack and its contents in the hands of Steve Rush.

In the meantime the attention of the visitors had been attracted. They discovered all at once that something unusual was taking place.

"Hello, what's this—a fight?" cried Mr. Cary.

Those who knew did not answer. They stood with pale faces, wide-eyed, watching the efforts of the Iron Boys. [194]

No sooner had Steve gotten possession of the bag than the Italian leaped to his feet. With an angry imprecation, he sprang at Steve, knife in hand.

But Jarvis was watching him. The boy made a leap, landing a powerful blow with his fist on the back of the Italian's head. The man collapsed in a heap. Bob was down on his knees beside his companion in an instant. Steve had thrown the burning bag into the gutter extending along the track, where there trickled a little stream of water that had been turned a dull red by the iron ore. There was little water there, but Rush was scooping up what there was of the water and mud, and with it patting out the fire in the sack.

Bob began doing the same, but now little flames were starting up all over the bag.

"Beat it out with your hands!" cried Steve. "It's getting the best of us. If it reaches the fuses, we're done for!"

"Skip, Steve; let me do it."

Rush did not answer. He was beating a tattoo on the bag, now and then grabbing up a handful of mud and water to soothe the hands which were already quite badly burned.

"It's out," announced Bob at last.

The Iron Boys' prompt action had prevented the fuses from igniting. All this had occupied but a few seconds. Instinctively the visitors realized that something was wrong, but they did not understand what that something was. [195]

Steve rolled the bag over two or three times, soaking it as well as he could with the little water at hand. He then opened the mouth of the sack, emptying the contents into the gutter and soaking that with water. This done, he threw the sack away and straightened up, his face flushed from his exertions.

The Italian was just getting to his feet unsteadily, but there was an angry light in his eyes.

Steve pointed to the sack.

"How did that happen?" demanded the lad.

"Me not know," was the answer, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Why you hit me?"

"Why did I hit you?" repeated Bob. "If I hadn't you'd been sailing skyward by this time."

The Italian started away, muttering sullenly. Steve stepped forward, laying a restraining hand on the man's arm.

"Wait a minute. I want to talk with you."

Mr. Carrhart sat down on the bench rather heavily, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Now, Carrhart, perhaps you will tell us the meaning of this remarkable scene," said Mr. Cary. [196]
"Something is up. I have a suspicion."

"Yes, you are right; something is up—or *was*. Do you gentlemen know what was in that bag that you saw on fire just now?"

"No."

"It was dynamite," said the president in an impressive tone.

"Dynamite!" exclaimed the visitors in one voice.

"Yes. How much was there in the bag, Mr. Penton?" asked Mr. Carrhart.

"I should judge there were a dozen charges; about fifty pounds, I should say."

The blanched faces of the visitors evidenced their understanding.

"Enough to blow us into kingdom come," added the superintendent.

"Then—then those boys have saved our lives?"

"They have," said Mr. Penton.

"Yes, and that act of theirs is sufficient to earn for them the Medal of Honor. I never knew of a braver act," added the president. "Rush, come here! Jarvis, I want you, too."

The boys obeyed the command, Steve leading the unwilling Italian around the chutes to the platform, where he stood him against the wall.

"You stay there until you are wanted!" ordered the boy, at which Mr. Penton nodded his approval. [197]

The visitors crowded forward, expressing their admiration at the bravery of the Iron Boys, at the same time plying them with eager questions.

"How did you ever have the courage to do it?" questioned one man.

"Because I didn't want to be blown up," answered Steve simply, at which the tension was relieved and everyone laughed.

"What I should like to know," exclaimed Mr. Carrhart, "is how this affair occurred—how did that bag of dynamite chance to catch fire?"

"From the Italian's candle, of course," said Mr. Cary. "I always have considered those open lights dangerous, especially where high explosives are used. We should have enclosed lights, the same as they do in the coal mines."

"What do you think about it, Rush?" asked the president, turning to the young man inquiringly.

"It did not catch from the man's candle, sir," answered the lad confidently.

"You think not?"

"I am sure of it, sir."

"What makes you think it did not?"

"Because the candle was on the front of his cap. It is there now, as you can see for yourself. The fire, when I first saw it, was burning at the bottom of the bag on the man's back. I do not see, by any stretch of the imagination, how the candle could have fired the cloth." [198]

"You're right."

"Mr. Penton, would you like to question the man?" asked Steve, nodding toward the Italian.

"Yes. Come here, Dominick."

The Italian obeyed with sullenness.

"How did this thing happen, Dominick?"

"Me not know."

"You did not have your candle in your hand at any time, did you?"

"Me have candle in hat."

"Was it there when you picked up the bag?"

"Yes."

"You are sure of that?"

"Me sure."

"May I ask a question?" inquired Steve.

"Certainly."

"Did you pass or meet anyone just before you reached the chutes here?"

"Me not meet any one."

"I don't understand this at all," said Mr. Penton. "Dominick is trustworthy, so far as I am aware. At least no charges ever have been made against him."

"He seemed to me to be pretty handy with his knife," suggested the president. "I shouldn't want to trust a man very far who acted that way, would you, Rush?" [199]

"Well, no, sir; but I shouldn't accuse him of setting fire to a bag of dynamite, then calmly shouldering the bag and marching off. At least, not unless he was determined to commit suicide."

There was a hearty laugh, this time at the expense of the president.

"There's good logic in that, at any rate," agreed Mr. Carrhart.

Steve was studying the face of the Italian keenly. This Mr. Carrhart observed and nodded significantly to Superintendent Penton. But Steve could not make up his mind that Dominick was in any way to blame for what had barely missed being a great disaster.

Both lads were puzzled. They could not understand it at all.

"Perhaps a spark dropped from the trolley wire, thus firing the bag," suggested the superintendent, after briefly turning the question over in his mind.

"That is a plausible explanation," said Mr. Carrhart, "and for want of a better one we shall have to let it go at that. Yes, I think that must be the explanation."

The party decided that they had seen enough of the Cousin Jack for one day. Some of the officials were more anxious to get out of the place than they cared to admit. They were not used to having their luncheons interrupted by fifty-pound sacks of dynamite catching fire. [200]

Each, before leaving, stepped up and shook hands with the Iron Boys.

"I want to see you before I leave the range," said Mr. Carrhart as he bade Steve good-bye.

"Yes, sir," answered the boy, touching his hat, as he stepped to one side to permit the visitors to pass around the chute.

"We must do something for those boys," said Mr. Cary to the president.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Carrhart.

"They are doing something for themselves, gentlemen," returned the superintendent. "They are not lads to need much help. They are the kind who carve out their own futures."

"Well, they've gone," announced Bob, stamping the dirt from his shoes. "What do you think of it?"

"Of the fire—the burning bag, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I think it was a mighty queer occurrence."

"So do I," agreed Jarvis, "and it's my opinion that it will bear looking into."

"Where's Dominick?" [201]

"He sneaked away when the others left. But he is of no use to us. He knows nothing about this affair, beyond what we all saw. We must look beyond him for the cause of the fire. Well, I'm off."

The lads separated for the time being and went off about their duties. But the thought of the fired bag kept recurring to Steve Rush. He turned the matter over and over in his mind, yet without being able to reach any definite conclusion regarding it.

"I wish I knew," he mused. "It is not my business, however, to inquire into the affair unless I have orders to do so."

He was to receive his orders sooner than he imagined, and his investigations were eventually to develop some startling facts concerning conditions in the Cousin Jack Mine.

CHAPTER XX

 [202]

INTO A BLACK GULF

WHILE the Iron Boys were trudging through the mine, completing their weary rounds of miles with their eyes fixed keenly on the tracks, a meeting had been called at the office of the superintendent. All of the gentlemen who comprised the party of visitors at the mine were at the meeting.

Maps of the mines on the range were spread out on the table before them, and they were going over and discussing these maps in detail. Business was transacted with a speed that would have made most of the business men in that remote region dizzy headed.

Having disposed of the matters before them, the conversation turned to their recent narrow escape in the Cousin Jack Mine. The visitors were fully convinced now that the fire had been caused by a spark from the trolley wire, and Superintendent Penton, if he thought otherwise, did not say so. He had made up his mind, however, to push his inquiry a little further. He wanted to make sure that the suggestion was the correct one.

From the subject of the fired bag the men turned to a discussion of Steve Rush and Bob Jarvis. [203]

This ended in Mr. Cary's making a proposition. After a little discussion it was put in the form of a motion and passed with enthusiasm.

Of all of this, of course, the lads tramping along the levels far underground knew nothing. It was destined to come as a great surprise to them when they learned of the action taken by the officials of the company in the interest of the two plucky boys.

That night the officers boarded their private car and went on to visit other of the company's mines further up the range. Early on the following forenoon Superintendent Penton visited his own mine, and while there looked up Steve Rush.

The superintendent asked Steve what he thought about the theory of a spark from the wire having fired the dynamite bag.

"I don't take any stock in it," answered the boy promptly. "Do you, sir?"

"I have had my doubts, but how else could it have started?"

"I will answer that question by showing you that it could not have started from a wire spark. The fire started on the underside of the bag. Did you notice that?"

"No; it had spread over the bag when I caught sight of it. But I was reasonably certain there was more to it than we imagined when you asked Dominick if he met anyone in the level just before reaching the chutes." [204]

Steve nodded reflectively.

"What do you infer from the fire starting on the under side of the dynamite bag?"

"That someone had either accidentally or by design shoved a candle under the bag while Dominick was carrying it. That is the only way I can see that the fire might have started."

"I think you are right about that. But it surely was an accident. No one would be willing to take such terrible chances. Why, it might have blown everyone up within a wide radius."

"Yes, it would have done so."

"And yet you were down on your knees, with your nose right over the stuff, as if it were so much clay. I have steady nerves myself, but I don't believe I should have had the pluck to do that. At least, I know I should have turned my head away."

Steve laughed.

"I am afraid that would not have helped you much if the stuff had gone off."

"Rush, if you suspect anything keep your eyes open; that's all I have to say. What you don't see will not be worth the seeing."

"Very well, sir; I will do as you request, but I have not much hope of getting at the truth." [205]

"I'll risk that. I am going to the lower level. There is some difficulty with the pumps there, the engineer tells me," said the superintendent, proceeding on his way.

Steve had not very much to do, so he walked back to his old post on the seventeenth level to wait until Bob Jarvis should come along. Steve and the superintendent had no sooner left the spot where they had been talking than a figure slunk from a deserted drift near by, glanced up and down the level, then hurried away. The man's hat was pulled down, and the candle above aided in throwing his face into deep shadow, but the full beard was not hidden, had anyone been near by to observe it.

Steve had been sitting on the platform at the chutes for about thirty minutes when the level's telephone rang.

"Mr. Penton wants to see you on the lower level," said the telephone boy.

"Where is he?" questioned Steve.

"He says he'll meet you near the suction pipes."

"Very good," answered the lad, rising. "If Mr. Jarvis comes along tell him where I have gone. If I get through in time I will meet him here and go up with him."

Rush hurried over, signaled the cage tender that he wished to descend, and a short time afterwards was being plunged deeper into the mine. [206]

He left the cage at the sub-level just above the last level. The last level was flooded with water some twenty feet deep. All the water from the mine was drained down into the last level and from there pumped to the surface and thus disposed of.

There were naturally no mining operations carried on down on the last level.

Steve had been down there on numerous occasions and every inch of the ground was familiar to him. Upon leaving the cage he made his way through the dark, damp tunnels, whistling as he stepped briskly along. He could not imagine what Mr. Penton could want of him down there, for if anything were wrong with the pumping system it was a matter for the engineering department

and not for a track inspector.

Turning the last bend in the sub-level, Push began to move with more caution. A moment more and he caught sight of the big water pipes winding up through the roof of the level.

"I wonder where Mr. Penton is?" muttered the lad, stepping out on a plank platform.

As he did so a wave of dampness that almost chilled him swept up from the dark depths of the last level. An open space extended from the floor down to the level itself and from this soundings were occasionally taken to determine the depth of the water. The lead line hung from a peg driven into a crevice in the rock. Steve noted that the line was dry. [207]

"That is curious. Mr. Penton evidently has not made a sounding. I should have thought he would have done so if he had reason to think the water was not being pumped out as fast as it should be."

Rush raised his voice and called out the name of the superintendent. Only the echo of his own voice came back to him.

"That's queer," decided Steve. "But, of course, he did not telephone me from here. He probably is on one of the levels above this. I will wait."

Resuming his whistling, the lad began pacing back and forth on the planking, having stuck his candlestick back on his miner's hat.

The young inspector had been waiting for fully half an hour, but not a sign of the superintendent did he see.

"Well, this is getting rather tiresome," he said, pausing to listen to the rhythmic click of the pumps that his ears could faintly catch. "I think I will amuse myself by sounding the water level."

The lad took down the rope, to one end of which a piece of lead had been attached, spun the weighted end a few times about his head, letting it fly out into the darkness, listening intently as the line ran swiftly through his hands. [208]

A distant splash followed a few seconds later, whereupon the line gave out not quite so rapidly.

"It's down," nodded Steve. He leaned over the edge to pull the line in without drawing it over the edge of the planking, so that he could the better see that mark of the water on the rope.

"Gracious, I should hate to take a swim in that hole," said the Iron Boy, with a laugh.

He stopped suddenly. Steve thought he had heard something behind him.

"Is that you, Mr. Penton?" he asked, turning and peering into the darkness.

There was no reply.

"I must be getting the creeps," said Steve, beginning to whistle as he hauled in the line. "Wha—what—here, let go of me. Let—"

Some invisible force behind had put a sudden pressure upon Steve Rush. He was being rapidly shoved toward the edge of the platform.

All at once Steve felt the flooring drop from beneath his feet; and, without making a sound, the lad plunged over into the darkness.

A loud splash followed, then all was still.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING BOY

BOB JARVIS waited a long time at the chutes for his companion, but Steve did not return. This did not cause Bob any particular worry, as Steve no doubt had been called to some other part of the mine. So Bob deciding to wait no longer, strolled away.

At the close of the day's work, however, when Steve was not at the mouth of the shaft waiting for him, Bob began to wonder. He waited about the shaft for half an hour, then went on to his boarding place. Steve had not returned.

"Where's Rush?" demanded the boarding boss, knowing Steve's habit of punctuality.

"That is what's bothering me. I haven't seen him."

It was the business of the boarding boss to look quickly into any absences and report them to the superintendent or the mine captain. He got busy at once. Calling up the time-keeper's office, he inquired if Steve Rush had checked in.

The information came back a moment later that Steve had not come up from the mine yet; or, if

he had, he had failed to report himself.

"Then something has happened to him," was Jarvis' emphatic conclusion. "He left word for me to meet him at seventeen, but when I got there he had gone. I haven't seen him since." [210]

The boarding boss agreed so strongly that he telephoned to the superintendent. The latter had not yet arrived home from his office, so the mine captain was communicated with.

But Bob Jarvis already was out of the house, headed for the shaft at top speed.

"Has Steve Rush come up yet?" he demanded of the cage-tender.

"Haven't seen him."

Bob hesitated. He realized the futility of wandering about the mine not knowing in what part of it he should look for the missing Steve. He then hurried to the time-keeper's office, learning that nothing had been seen of the missing boy.

Bob did not know which way to turn. But by the time he had reached the shaft again Superintendent Penton was there, together with the mine captain, preparing to go below. The cage had just come up and the men were stepping aboard when a boy from the boarding house where the Iron Boys lived came running up out of breath.

"Wait!" cried Bob. "Here comes a boy from our hashery. Maybe Steve has gone home."

"What is it, boy?" called the superintendent. [211]

"Boss wanted me to tell you that the telephone man who lives with us says Mr. Rush got a telephone message from you to meet him at the lower level this afternoon. He says Rush didn't come back."

"I didn't send for him to meet me anywhere," answered the superintendent. "We'll go to the lower level. Shoot us down as fast as is safe," he added, addressing the cage-tender.

The bottom of the car seemed to be dropping from beneath their feet, so rapid was their descent.

Bob, holding to the support rod above their heads, was thinking fast and hard.

"I knew something had happened to Steve," he said. "Something has happened to him."

Mr. Penton had not spoken since the cage started. He, too, was thinking deeply. There was something about all this that he could not understand, though he was unable to clearly define what really was in his mind. If someone had called Steve Rush to come to the sub-level above the lower level, and had done so in the name of the superintendent, it must have been done either as a joke or for some other purpose that could only be surmised.

"Why should anyone have resorted to such a subterfuge?" wondered Mr. Penton.

Very much the same thoughts were running through the mind of Bob Jarvis. So engrossed was each with his own thoughts that neither man seemed to realize the dizzy rate of speed at which they were descending. Finally the cage began to slow down gradually, then finally came to an easy stop. [212]

There was no light in that sub-level, but the occupants of the cage knew exactly where they were. They knew the place as well as though the sub-level had been ablaze with light.

"All off," ordered the superintendent. "The cage will wait for us here."

He had given orders that the cage was to remain below until he signaled the tender to hoist. If the latter found it necessary to raise the cage before that he was to ring a certain signal on the gong, each level and sub-level being provided with one.

"All hands keep their eyes open," directed the leader of the searching party. "I haven't much hope that we shall find him here, however."

The group moved along the sub-level, glancing about them keenly as they did so, until they reached the turn or bend in the tunnel, where they paused to listen. The sub-level was as silent as a tomb. They could not even hear the rush of the water as it dashed into the lower level, some of it coming all the way from the surface. [213]

"Shall I call out?" asked Bob.

"Yes."

"Steve!" Bob's voice did not seem to carry far. It sounded weak to him.

"Oh, Steve! Steve Rush!" shouted the superintendent.

There being no response, he repeated the call several times, but with no better result.

"I guess it is useless, boys. I am afraid we shall not find him here. In fact, I can't believe that he came down here at all."

"The boy said you had telephoned to Steve to come down, didn't he?" asked Jarvis.

"Yes; but I did nothing of the sort. The telephone man must have made a mistake in the message

—or else—” Mr. Penton checked himself sharply. “We will look further, though I am sure we are wasting time. We shall probably find that he has fallen somewhere on one of the upper levels and hurt himself. If that is so, one of the watchmen is sure to discover him and report the matter at once. We will go out to the platform, then on up to the next level. I’ll have all the watchmen notified at once to take up the search.”

The searchers walked out on the planking where Steve had stood a couple of hours before. Mr. Penton peered down into the black pit, while the others stood a little back from him. [214]

“He is not here. It is as I thought. He has not been here, in all probability. We shall have to go on up, boys. I—”

Bob suddenly jerked his candle from his hat, holding the light to the floor. As he did so, he uttered a half-smothered exclamation, at the same time grabbing something from the planking and holding it up to the light.

“Look!” cried the lad. “Look! He hasn’t been here, eh?”

CHAPTER XXII

 [215]

WHEN THE WATERS CLOSED OVER HIM

STEVE did not cry out when he found himself plunging into the water, principally for the reason that he was too plucky to make an outcry when his safety was imperiled. In the second place, his mind was working so rapidly that he did not have time to cry out.

He struck the water with a splash, broadside on, quickly sinking beneath the surface. Steve was too good a swimmer to swallow any water, however, and began holding his breath even before he struck the water, knowing as he did what was about to happen. The result was that he had propelled himself to the surface before many seconds had elapsed. He came up shaking himself like a water dog, but was careful to make as little noise as possible.

As soon as he succeeded in getting the water out of his eyes, he looked up, expecting to see a light on the platform on the sub-level. All was inky blackness there, and not a sound could be heard save the rush of water.

Young Rush began swimming. He did not know whether there was a ladder extending down into the level or not, so he swam about for some time, feeling along the wall in search of something by which he might pull himself up. But he did not find a projection of any kind. The rocks forming the wall were smooth and slimy and felt like ice to the touch. [216]

He was beginning to feel chilled. Steve tried to recall what the map of the lower level looked like, but try as he might he could not recall a single detail of the map filed in the engineer’s office. By this time he did not know where he was. He had lost all sense of direction.

“I guess I am a goner. They’ve got me this time,” he said aloud. “I hope that Mr. Penton will find out how it happened.”

The boy was now shivering violently. His teeth were chattering and he began to wonder if he were freezing to death, for the sense of feeling seemed to have left his legs and arms. A numbness was slowly creeping over him.

“I must keep going, or I shall surely be drowned,” he cried, once more striking out and swimming as fast as he could, hoping thereby to restore his circulation to its former condition. But the water was too cold and the young miner’s efforts grew weaker as the moments passed.

Though he did not know it, the drift of the water on the lower level was toward the large pipes, where it was being sucked to the surface by the powerful pumps above.

As Steve reached over and over in a slow over-hand stroke, which now and then he varied by falling into the frog stroke, he forged slowly ahead until his hands suddenly struck some object that was not the rocky side of the level. The lad grasped it quickly. [217]

“A plank. Thank goodness!” he cried.

The plank had floated off either from the platform or from the lagging somewhere on that level. It made no difference to the swimmer where it had come from. He threw both arms about the plank and lay there resting for some time, breathing heavily. Finally he pulled himself over on the plank, stretching out lengthwise on it. The piece of wood held him up very well. Now and then he would paddle a little with his hands, propelling himself in one direction until it bumped against a wall, floating off with the current again.

While the lad realized that the chances were against his ever getting out of the level alive, he felt little fear. He was one of those rare beings in whom the emotion of fear had not been fully developed.

All the time the numbness was growing upon him. Instinctively realizing that he was likely to lose

control of his muscles, Steve wrapped both arms and legs about the plank so that he might not fall off and drown.

At last he became so benumbed and dazed that he could not help himself at all. A warm glow seemed to be spreading itself over his body. He had never felt more comfortable in his life, and a short time afterwards he gave way to his drowsiness. [218]

It was a few moments later that Superintendent Penton and his searching party entered the sub-level in search of Steve. Rush heard them call out his name, but he was too sleepy to answer. Then he heard no more.

When Bob Jarvis cried out "look," Mr. Penton and the mine captain had turned sharply.

"What is it?" they demanded eagerly and in one voice.

"A hat! It's Steve's hat!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Here's his name inside the crown. We wrote our names in with ink at the same time. You can see mine is the same—the same kind of ink—purple."

As the two men started toward Bob the mine captain stumbled over the sounding rope that lay on the platform. He stooped to pick it up, and as he did so he, too, uttered an exclamation.

"This line is wet, Mr. Penton," he said excitedly.

"Then Steve has been casting it. He has been sounding the level, probably to pass away the time while he was waiting for me." [219]

Once more the superintendent raised his voice, calling out the name of Steve Rush. As before there was no response.

"Boys, I see—I understand. Steve has fallen into the level and drowned. No doubt he fell in while casting the lead, for part of the line is dangling over the edge there now. Too bad, too bad. But ___"

"He may not be drowned. Let's do something," begged Bob.

"What would you suggest?"

"Why, look for him, of course. I'll go over myself and look for him."

"Lad, it would be suicide. You would drown, even if you were not too chilled to swim after you got into the water. You—"

"I'd like to see any water that could drown me," answered Bob.

"We must have help, and at once. Jim, run up to the next level and telephone for help. Have them send down several men. Be quick about it."

"Ask them to bring ropes," interjected Bob.

"Yes, have them bring down ropes," repeated the superintendent.

Bob began ripping up the planking on the platform. His active mind had thought out a plan and he did not wait for permission to put it into operation. [220]

"What are you doing there, lad?"

"I am making a raft. We have got to have something which will float on the water. We can fasten it together when the men get here with ropes. I'll be ready before they can get here."

Jarvis was working with desperate haste. Perhaps his companion was not yet dead. At least Bob would know that he had done his best.

"Hark!"

"What is it?" whispered Bob.

"I thought I heard someone call. I am sure I did. Rush! Oh, Steve!"

A faint "here," that sounded far away reached their ears.

"He's alive! I tell you, he's alive!" cried Bob Jarvis.

Grabbing the end of one of the planks that he had torn loose, Bob began dragging it toward the edge of the platform.

"What are you going to do, lad?"

"Do? Why, sir, I'm going after him."

"Wait; let the men do that. I cannot have you going in there," objected Mr. Penton. But Bob did

not stop. He hauled the plank over, and, snatching the rope, made one end of the latter fast about the plank. He then began letting the plank over the side, end first. It nearly got away from him, the rope burning the skin from his palms as it spun through his hands.

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"Let me help you." Mr. Penton sprang forward, throwing himself on the fast running rope.

"The plank is on the water. It can't get away from us now," said Bob, beginning to strip off his jacket, first having stuck his candlestick in a niche in the rocks.

"You are not going over!"

"Yes, sir, I am going over. We haven't a minute to lose."

"I advise you not to do so."

The superintendent was far from being a timid man, but he knew the danger; he felt that his responsibility was too great to permit the boy to enter that black hole.

"You hold the rope. Nothing can happen to me. I am not afraid of ice water, nor any other kind. Maybe I shall be able to find him by the time the men get here. We shall gain some precious minutes in that way."

Next the boy's heavy boots came off, leaving him in his stocking feet. He passed the end of the rope to the superintendent.

"Will you please hold your candle over the edge, so I can see where the plank is, sir?"

Mr. Penton did so.

"Be careful, Jarvis; do be careful," he urged. "I ought not to let you do this. If anything happens to you I shall feel that I am directly responsible."

[222]

"Do not fear; nothing will happen to me."

Bob peered down into the dark waters, where, after a moment, he made out the plank floating slowly toward the spot where the pipes disappeared beneath the surface.

"Now, please hold the light up high, so that I can see what I am doing."

The lad poised a moment, then leaped far out into the darkness. Instead of making a dive, head first, Bob chose to go down feet first. His body straightened, and as he neared the water he clasped his hands above his head. He took the water cleanly, making only a slight splash as he disappeared beneath the surface.

As soon as he felt the water closing over him the Iron Boy threw out both hands to stay his progress and began treading water vigorously. He soon regained the surface.

Jarvis came up blowing and puffing, shaking his head and making the water fairly foam about him as he struck out with hands and feet.

"Are you all right, Jarvis?" called Mr. Penton in an anxious tone.

"Yes, where's the plank?"

"To the right of you. A little more to the right. There, it is directly ahead of you now."

A few powerful strokes and Bob had grasped the plank. He pulled himself partly up on it and looked about him.

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"Can't you let a candle down to light up this hole?" he called.

"I have nothing to let one down with. Do you see anything?"

"Nothing that I want to see. Ho, Steve!"

"Here," sounded the faint answer that seemed to come from several different directions at the same time.

"Did you hear that?" demanded Bob excitedly. "Where did the sound come from?"

"It sounded to me as though he might be over to the left. Have courage, Steve; we will have you out in a few minutes. I have sent for help. Can you keep up?"

Their ears failed to catch any answer.

"I'm coming, Steve," roared Jarvis. "Keep shouting if you can, so I'll know where you are."

"Stay where you are, Jarvis!" commanded Mr. Penton sternly.

"Do you think I'm going to stay here and let him drown?" demanded the lad. There was a splash as Bob Jarvis left the plank and began ploughing through the water at racing speed.

"He'll be drowned; they both will be drowned!" exclaimed the superintendent. "Such pluck, such pluck! Hurry up, men; hurry!" he shouted as he caught the sound of voices off in the darkness of the sub-level.

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Half a dozen men, headed by the mine captain, came running toward him.

"Look out! Look out for the hole in the floor. Have you ropes?"

"Yes."

"Then tie a few planks together. Make a raft and let it over the side. Work fast, for once in your lives! There are two men down there and they may be drowning."

"Oh, Steve!"

They could hear Bob's voice calling to his companion. The voice sounded far away, for Bob had plunged ahead, beating his way courageously through the waters in the black darkness.

"I hear him. He's ahead of me," Jarvis shouted.

"Can you hold out?" called Mr. Penton.

"Yes—as long as there's water to float on!" the answer came back faintly.

In the meantime the men were ripping up the planks. Several of these they lashed together and let carefully down over the edge of the platform, or what was left of it. They had made ropes fast at both ends, in order that the raft might make a landing platform.

"Now you men let me down," commanded the superintendent.

[225]

"You had better let me go, sir," advised the mine captain. "I am lighter than you."

"It's my place to go; do as I tell you. While I am down there rig a sling to pull us up on. Jim, you take charge of the operations at this end and see that there is no slip anywhere."

"I will, sir," answered the mine captain.

Superintendent Penton grasped the rope that had been made fast to a shore post on the sub-level and let himself down. He was a strong man, used to emergencies and well able to take care of himself anywhere in the mine. Shortly afterwards he was standing on the platform or raft below, steadying himself by holding to the rope and the side wall.

"Are you all right, Bob?" he shouted.

"Yes."

"If he happens to get into a drift, they're both lost. Pass down some candles from above, Jim."

Several were let down on a rope and these Mr. Penton stuck into the wall, lighting up the scene fairly well.

"They're calling you, sir," cried Jim.

"What is it?" roared the superintendent.

"I've got him." It was Jarvis' voice, and Mr. Penton breathed a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER XXIII

[226]

A THOUSAND FEET OF LADDERS

AFTER what seemed an endless wait, the watchers heard a great splashing far out on the water. It was Jarvis paddling toward the raft. He had found Steve, the latter unconscious. Just as Bob reached the plank on which the other boy was hanging Steve slipped off into the water.

Bob dived for his chum without an instant's hesitation and when he came up he was gripping the half-drowned Steve. The latter had relapsed into unconsciousness. By this time the plank had floated away several yards. Bob had a hard struggle to reach it, but at last he succeeded, and after great effort managed to place Rush partly on it, so the latter's head would be out of water.

Bob pulled himself upon one end of the plank, so that the other end would be clear of the water, and began paddling. The water fairly flew under his efforts, the swimmer now and then using his feet to help steer the awkward craft.

"I can't see the light. Where are you?" Jarvis cried.

"Here!" shouted Mr. Penton.

A bend in the rocky wall hid the light of the candles from the raft. After several minutes of paddling Bob caught the faint light ahead of him.

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"I'm all right now, if Steve is only all right."

"Is he alive?" called Mr. Penton, as he made out the strange craft bearing slowly down upon him.

"Yes, but he's unconscious."

"Then hurry as fast as you can."

"I am hurrying. This isn't a speed boat."

The plank drew up alongside the raft after some difficult manœuvring on the part of Bob Jarvis. Mr. Penton grasped the limp form of Steve Rush, hauling him to the raft.

There was a splash and a choking exclamation. The plank had turned turtle, landing Bob in the water on his back. The boy was almost exhausted, but he righted himself and swam to the raft, to which he held for a moment to rest himself. He then clambered to the raft. He had barely enough strength left to support himself.

The superintendent was tying Steve in the sling that the men had made.

"Haul away, above there!" he roared. "Be as quick as you can, but be careful. Look out, there! What are you trying to do?"

Steve's body had hit the rocks with a resounding bump, but the boy did not feel the shock.

"Let the sling down at once. Two of you get at Rush and rub him. Don't be afraid of rubbing too hard. Start his circulation." [228]

The sling was dropped over the side again, while two of the miners set to work on Steve.

"Get in," commanded Mr. Penton, as the sling came down to them.

"You first, sir," said Bob.

"Get in, I said!" The superintendent's voice had a note of authority that was not to be disputed.

Jarvis reluctantly took his place in the sling.

"Haul away," he called, and Bob was quickly drawn to the platform, where he dropped on his knees by Steve's side, pushing one of the men away, and began slapping the unconscious boy's feet, from which the boots and stockings had been removed. Steve was scarcely breathing.

The sling had been lowered quickly after bringing Jarvis up, and the superintendent took his place in it. The men began hauling him up, but with great difficulty, for Mr. Penton was a heavily built man.

All at once the men sat down. A splash followed almost instantly.

"The rope's broken!" cried one, as Bob bounded to his feet.

"Are you hurt?" he cried, running to the edge.

There was no reply. [229]

"He's fallen into the water!" shouted another of the men.

Once more Bob Jarvis leaped from the platform, but this time he dived head first. Like a flash he realized that, having struck the platform, Mr. Penton undoubtedly had been stunned and was unable to help himself.

Such was the case. Coming to the surface almost at once, Bob swam about for a minute or so before discovering Mr. Penton's whereabouts. The superintendent was beginning to struggle, but he was too much dazed to help himself.

Jarvis was by his side with a few swift strokes. He did not wait to inquire whether the superintendent were hurt or not, but, grabbing the man by the collar, Bob began kicking himself toward the platform. By the time they had reached there Mr. Penton was able to help himself a little, but the boy had a hard tussle to get the superintendent on the platform.

Mr. Penton lay down for a brief moment, then sat up.

"Are you able to try it again?" asked Bob.

"Yes. What happened?"

"The rope broke. You got a pretty hard bump."

Another sling had been quickly rigged, and this being let down, Mr. Penton was drawn up again, Bob waiting below, but standing to one side, so that in case another accident occurred he should not be carried down, too. [230]

The next trip Jarvis was drawn up. He found the superintendent a little dazed, but holding himself together firmly.

"Thank you," he said shortly, flashing a look at Bob. "We must get Rush up at once where he may have care. Carry him over to the cage. Leave everything as it is here. We have no time to attend to anything but the boy."

The men picked up the lad and bore him through the sub-level. Steve was still limp and unconscious.

Reaching the cage, Mr. Benton gave the signal to hoist. The car did not move, whereupon the superintendent, with an impatient exclamation reached out, giving the signal lever another pull.

"What does this mean?" He rang again to hoist the cage. "Bob, run up to the telephone on the next level and find out what's the matter. The Evil One himself seems to have taken possession of this mine of late."

Jarvis came running back a few minutes later.

"Well, what is it?"

"The cage-tender says the machinery has broken down."

"Did he say what the trouble is?"

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"He said the engineer had sent word that the big cog wheel had stripped itself. They can't move the cage, and probably will not be able to do so for some hours. They are taking the old wheel off now, preparatory to putting on the spare wheel."

Mr. Penton clenched his hands to keep from expressing himself as he would like to do.

"We must get this boy somewhere where we can warm him up, or he will die on our hands. The only place I know of is the pump station and——"

"Then we will carry Steve up the ladders," interrupted Bob.

"But, boy, it is nearly a thousand feet from here to the pump station. We can't get him up there by hand."

"I'll show you whether we can or not. One of you go ahead and light the way. Help me through the manholes at the platforms and we'll get him up there in short order. Mr. Penton, will you have somebody follow close behind me to help a little?"

"Do you think you will be able to do it?"

"I don't think! I know!"

"Then I will carry him myself."

"No, sir; I will carry him. You are not able. You are still suffering from the bump you got."

Without further words Jarvis picked up the limp form of his companion. He staggered a little as he swung Steve over his shoulder, the boy's head drooping over on Bob's left breast. Then began a climb that is talked of to this day in the Cousin Jack Mine. Up ladder after ladder staggered Bob Jarvis with the form of his companion over his shoulder. Now and then he would pause on a landing for a breathing spell, where, with heaving chest, he would lean against the rocky wall with eyes closed and everything swimming dizzily about him. Mr. Penton and the searching party followed him up the ladder, but he would let none of them relieve him of his burden.

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"Had—hadn't you better telephone for a surgeon to meet us at the pump station?" asked Jarvis.

"Yes, but how will he get down?"

"Let him climb down the ladders. I guess he can climb down if we can go the other way."

"It shall be done at once." Mr. Penton gave the order and the mine captain left them at the next landing to telephone to the company's hospital.

After a long struggle they reached the level where the pump station was located. Even here Bob Jarvis refused to give up his burden. He staggered down the level to where the big pumps were working, tenderly laying Steve down on a blanket that the engineer had thrown down. Then Bob settled down in a heap.

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Bob Staggered Up the Ladder With His Burden.

"Strip the boy," commanded Mr. Penton. "If you have any warm blankets here, wrap him in them. If not, use some of your waste. You have barrels of that on hand." [235]

Steve's wet, clinging clothes were quickly removed. There being no other blankets, waste used for wiping the engines was wrapped about him, the rubbing process having been resumed.

Nearly an hour elapsed before the surgeon, red of face, puffing from his exertions, came hurrying down the level.

He was quickly made acquainted with the situation and got to work at once.

"Do you think his condition is serious?" demanded the superintendent.

"No, not unless pneumonia sets in. That is the great danger, and he will be lucky if he escapes it. Is there any chance of getting him up to-night?"

"I can't say. I am going on up as soon as I hear something definite from you regarding the boy's condition."

"I shall be able to give that to you very soon, for his circulation has already started."

The color was returning to the lad's lips and cheeks, and his breath was coming more regularly. Half an hour from that time Steve had fully recovered his senses and announced himself as ready to get up and dress. [236]

The surgeon advised him not to do so, finally ordering the patient to remain as he was. Rush accepted the order with poor grace. His clothing was being dried out by the pump engineer, the garments being ready very shortly afterwards.

Jarvis had wholly recovered from the strain that he had been under, except that he was still a little weak in the knees.

"We owe our lives to your friend Jarvis," said Mr. Penton, after Steve had been made as comfortable as possible. "But what I wish to know is how you happened to get into the lower level. Did you fall while sounding with the line?"

Rush hesitated, then glancing up at the superintendent, replied:

"No, sir; I did not fall."

"I don't understand."

"I was pushed in, Mr. Penton."

"You don't mean that—surely you cannot mean that, Rush!" exclaimed Mr. Penton in amazement.

"Yes, sir; I was."

"Who pushed you?"

"That is what I should like to know."

"This is really incredible, Rush. Are you quite sure you are not mistaken?" [237]

"I am not mistaken."

"Tell me about it."

"When you sent for me——"

"I did not send for you. That was a mistake. And that is what puzzles me. I am told you thought you received a message from me to meet you on the sub-level above the lowest level."

"Yes, sir; that was the message I received."

"Well, I never sent it. I haven't been down there recently. I had started to go there to-day when some other matters came up calling me back to the office."

"You did not send for me?"

"I certainly did not."

"Then whoever did send that message must have done so for the purpose of getting me down there to do me up. I begin to understand."

"But, Steve, who could bear you such ill will?"

"I don't know."

"It isn't Steve alone they are after," interjected Jarvis. "The rascals seem to have it in for the mine, too. Take, for instance, the cage. They've put that out of business."

"The villains! I should like to catch them—I should like to get my hands on the man who pushed me in this afternoon."

"You did not finish telling me of the occurrence," said Mr. Penton.

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Steve related the story of his adventure, the others listening with grave faces as the narrative proceeded.

"Now, tell me how you found me," he said in conclusion.

"Jarvis missed you. But did you not get sight of the man at all?"

"No, sir."

"You do not know whether there was more than one?"

"I do not. I didn't know there was one until he placed his hands against my back and pushed me in. When I came up, after the first plunge, I tried to see who was on the platform, but I neither saw nor heard anyone. I can't understand why he didn't hit me."

"The scoundrel probably wanted it to appear to be an accident. He thought you would not get out of that hole very easily," said Bob.

"Nor should I, in all probability, had it not been for you."

"Rush, we must go into this matter very thoroughly. The man who let you through the trap on number seventeen is no longer with us. He has not been with us for several months, but the attacks on you have been renewed. Next thing we know damage will be done to the company's property. I don't want to confess that we are beaten and send for detectives."

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"You leave it to us—we'll catch him," spoke up Bob Jarvis. "I have an itching at my finger tips and I won't do a thing to him when I get them on him."

"That is exactly what I want you boys to do—find the man or men guilty of this outrage, and I shall not be as lenient as I was in the other affair."

Steve lay with half-closed eyes thinking deeply. Instinctively there appeared to his mental vision the picture of the bewhiskered man whom he had seen several weeks before, and who made such an unfavorable impression upon him.

"Yes; I shall be very glad to do what I can," he said, glancing up at Mr. Penton. "I am ready to begin at once. Doctor, don't you think it is about time you were letting me get up?"

After taking Steve's temperature and thumping him upon the chest, the physician decided to let the lad get up and dress. He did, however, most emphatically protest against Rush climbing the ladders all the way to the surface.

Steve found himself a little weak from his experiences, and it was decided that he should remain in the mine for the rest of the night, or until the cage machinery had been repaired so he could ride up. The surgeon sat nodding in the pump-man's chair, and the men who had assisted in the rescue returned to their duties in other parts of the mine.

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Mr. Penton had been in communication with the surface by telephone. He learned that all was being done that could be done to repair the hoisting apparatus in the shortest possible time, so there was no necessity for him to climb the rest of the way up.

"I think I'll stay down here with you boys for the rest of the night," he said. "Everything is quiet. I see the surgeon has put the engineer out of house and home, so I think I shall lie down on the

work-bench and get a little sleep."

"Yes, it is quiet enough," began Steve, when suddenly there came a dull, muffled report. The ground beneath their feet trembled perceptibly, then silence reigned.

Mr. Penton sprang from the bench where he was just composing himself for a sleep.

"Did you hear that!"

"Yes, sir; we heard it," answered Rush.

"What was it?" questioned Bob, his head inclined in a listening attitude.

"It sounded like an explosion," said Steve.

"It *was* an explosion. That was dynamite, boys. Something is going on here. There should be no blasting in the mines to-night."

Mr. Penton ran to the telephone to find out what the explosion meant. [241]

"It looks as though our work were cut out for us, Steve," said Jarvis in a low tone.

"I am beginning to think so myself," answered Steve, after listening intently for a moment.

CHAPTER XXIV

 [242]

CONCLUSION

"**W**HAT was it, Mr. Penton?" called Steve, as he saw the superintendent approaching.

"I shall have to leave you," returned the superintendent. "Jarvis, if Rush does not need you, you may come with me."

"Is there any trouble, sir?" questioned Steve.

"Yes; there is trouble. Someone has dropped a charge of dynamite down the cage shaft. They tell me the cage is wrecked. Of course that doesn't amount to much, if there is no further damage, but there is no telling where this business is going to end. I must get up to the surface, and at once."

"Then I am going with you," announced Steve with emphasis. "I am perfectly able. There is nothing the matter with me except inactivity. I am anxious to be doing something. But, Mr. Penton, that charge of dynamite surely was not dropped in from the surface, was it?"

"No; that would not be possible."

"That means that someone in the mine has dropped it from one of the levels."

"Yes, yes."

"Then I would suggest telephoning to the top of the shaft to have the ladder hole leading to the open watched, and no one to be allowed to leave the mine unless able to give a good account of himself." [243]

"Your idea is an excellent one. I will give the order at once."

The superintendent did so; then the men started upward. At Rush's suggestion the party divided. The mine captain had been picked up in the meantime, and the four men divided themselves into two parties, each party taking a level through which it moved, visiting every place where men were at work, questioning each sharply as to whether any of their shift had left their work during the last hour.

The search was fruitless. There were not many men working on the night shift, and beyond considerable ladder climbing, the two parties had finished their search within a few hours.

The four men met on the surface shortly after midnight.

The Iron Boys had nothing to report; neither had Mr. Penton nor the mine captain met with any better results. The mystery was still unexplained.

"Rush, you usually have ideas on most subjects. What do you think about this affair?"

"I hardly know what to think. I have an idea, however, as to where the charge was dropped from." [244]

"From where was it dropped?" demanded the superintendent sharply.

"From the first sub-level below the surface. You see, it would be very easy for anyone to go down that ladder there at night, without attracting attention. He could have dropped the charge down through the shaft and been out and away long before you telephoned up here."

"That is very true. It may explain that part of the affair."

"We found a fuse on the first sub-level near the shaft, but of course that doesn't prove anything. It may have been dropped there by any one of fifty different men."

The superintendent's face was stern as he pondered over the matter that was disturbing them all.

"Rush, I want you boys to devote your time, during the next few days, to working on this case. I know of no one else better qualified to do it. If you can't get to the bottom of the mystery, I know of no one who can. In the meantime I shall be pursuing some investigations of my own."

"Very well, sir; do you wish us to drop our work?"

"As a matter of fact, yes; but you need not appear to have done so. Pretend to make your rounds, but devote your time to running down this mystery. The officials will be back here within the next few days. I want this affair cleared up before they get here, so work fast. You have my authority to go to any length necessary to solve the mystery and to discover the guilty ones. Now, show me what you can do." [245]

"It is a pretty big contract you have given us, sir, but we will do the best we can. We have personal reasons for wanting to succeed, as you can understand."

"We have," affirmed Bob Jarvis grimly.

The boys bade the superintendent good night and went to their boarding place. The following morning found Rush suffering from a severe cold. He could barely speak, but he went to the mine, nevertheless. The cage was not yet ready for use, but the superintendent had had the ore skips rigged to carry men down, which was done at greatly reduced speed, but at the usual time the mine was in full operation.

All that day the two boys tramped about the mine, part of the time in company and at other times pursuing their investigations separately. They talked with the men, working in various subtle ways to obtain hints that might start them in the right direction.

Night came, but when they compared notes they found that they had made no progress. [246]

"I would go back to-night," said Steve thoughtfully, "but to do so would attract attention. They know we do not work at night and someone might become suspicious."

The next day was a repetition of the previous one so far as results were concerned. Not a clue did either boy find. This went on for three days, during which time they had not seen Mr. Penton. He was giving his two track inspectors a clear field, unhampered by any directions from him, and this put them on their mettle, perhaps more keenly than would otherwise have been the case.

"To-morrow will be Saturday. Don't you think it would be a good time for us to camp on the trail steadily?" asked Jarvis on Friday night as they were going home.

"I have been thinking of that. I'll tell you what I want you to do to-morrow. Go to the pay clerk and time checker and find out who is left in the mine after all hands who are going to do so have checked in and drawn their wages. When you get the list bring it below to me. I will meet you somewhere near the chutes on seventeen. I want only the names of those who belong on the shift working Saturday afternoon. There will not be many of them."

Jarvis carried out his instructions and brought the list to Rush on the following day. The two boys scanned the list keenly, after which they made tours of the working drifts, finding all the men at their stations and no one in the mine who did not belong there. [247]

"I'm coming back to-night," decided Steve with emphasis. "I am satisfied that the people we are looking for are not on the day shift. We will come down about eight o'clock, by way of the ladders, and prowl quietly about. We will use our candles only when we get in drifts where there is no one at work."

"We won't catch anyone. They're too sharp for us."

"Perhaps not to-night, but we'll get them if it takes a year to do it. I'll never give up till I have won this game of hide and seek. When you go after a thing, Bob, make up your mind you're going to get it. You'll land somewhere near the mark if you follow that policy."

"I've got the dynamite report here for you."

Steve examined the report carefully. He had done a very shrewd thing. He had held the keeper of the dynamite stores responsible for a complete list of all the sticks of dynamite given out to the miners each day, and then had visited the drifts to find out how many charges had been fired and how many sticks had been used. As dynamite is never issued, except for immediate use, there could be none left over after the day's work was done. By the time the holes are drilled a messenger is on hand with just enough sticks of the deadly stuff to fill the holes. [248]

After checking up, the young inspectors found that twelve sticks of the explosive were unaccounted for. They had been drawn from the stores, but not used.

"We are beginning to get somewhere, old chap," Steve said, nodding to his companion.

"That means that someone—some unauthorized person—has drawn some dynamite from the

stores, does it not?" questioned Jarvis.

"That is the way I figure it out. It may mean nothing, so far as our case is concerned, and it may mean much."

The boys remained in the mine as usual until the shift went up at six o'clock. At the appointed hour, eight o'clock, they made their way back to the shaft, but instead of going down on the cage they slipped into the ladder hole and began their descent in this way. It was decided that Bob should begin at the upper levels and work down, while Steve was to make his way to the bottom of the shaft and work up. When they met they would compare notes. Each had a list of every man who had business in the mine that night, so that they could find out, by asking a man's name, whether or not he had a right to be there. [249]

Steve had gone directly to the bottom and covered every level up to that where the pump station was located, about half way up the shaft. He started along this level, keeping out of sight as much as possible, which had been the policy of each lad, as agreed upon beforehand.

Steve had not proceeded far when he discovered that someone was walking along the level ahead of him. At first he thought it was Jarvis, as the man's hat held no light, and Bob should be somewhere about at that time.

Steve quickened his steps, intending to overhaul the man and speak to him. All at once the fellow turned abruptly off from the main level, entering a drift that ran to the south, but as he passed under the electric light at the turn Steve Rush made a discovery.

The man was heavily bearded and Steve recognized him instantly.

"It's the man Klink," he muttered. "What is he doing in that drift at this time of night?"

Consulting his list, the boy saw that Klink did not belong to the night shift of that particular night. He moved up, intending to follow Klink into the drift, when the man suddenly emerged. Steve flattened himself on the ground and waited, while the other glanced cautiously up and down the level. Satisfying himself that no one was about, Klink turned and walked on. [250]

The watcher lost no time in following, but Rush kept at a safe distance, dodging when he had to pass an electric light, now and then throwing himself beside the track flat in the mud and water of the gutter when he thought Klink was about to look back. In this way he avoided discovery.

Klink continued on until he neared the pump station, when he slackened his pace. Fortunately for Steve, there were no lights in that part of the level, so that he had little difficulty in keeping out of sight. Klink kept on walking until nearly opposite the pump station, when he suddenly disappeared. For a moment Rush was puzzled; then he discovered that his man had stepped in between two posts that held up the lagging at the side of the tunnel.

The boy's eyes gleamed.

"Now, my fine gentleman, we'll find out what is going on here! I believe I have landed the man I am looking for. I——"

It was just midnight, and the pump man had left his machinery to go for water to drink with his lunch. Steve understood this, and evidently the man who was pressed close up against the lagging did also, for he quickly stepped out, glanced about him, then ran to the square opening cut in the rocks in which the pump machinery was located. [251]

Rush ran up on tiptoe to within about twenty yards of the pump station. He was watching Klink narrowly. The latter snatched something from inside his coat, thrusting the object under the plunger of the largest of the pumps. Next came something long, slender and white that looked like a large string.

Almost holding his breath, Steve crept nearer.

"He is attaching a fuse. That was dynamite that he put under the plunger. He's going to blow up the pumps and flood the mine!"

Klink struck a match and applied it to the end of the fuse.

It was now Steve Rush's time to act. Seconds were precious. The boy seemed scarcely to touch the ground as he sprinted forward. He was upon the man before Klink saw him. One swift kick from Steve's heavy boot toppled the man over on his side.

The Iron Boy snatched the burning fuse from the stick of dynamite and hurled it from him.

By that time Klink was on his feet. With blazing eyes he rushed at the boy. Steve believed, and with good reason, that Klink intended to murder him. But the boy stood calmly awaiting the onslaught. The man was large and powerful, but this did not daunt the plucky lad.

Klink was now more than three feet from him when, suddenly, Steve's right foot flew out, catching the fellow fairly in the pit of the stomach. The man uttered an exclamation, at the same time pressing both hands to the spot where the heavy boot had landed. [252]

Rush fairly leaped into the air, his fist catching Klink directly between the eyes. Klink toppled over backwards, and Rush, having lost his balance, fell prone on top of him.

The fellow's arms and legs instantly clasped the boy in a tight embrace. But in that one close look into the fellow's eyes, Steve had recognized him.

"I know you! You're Spooner, and I've got you, you villain!" breathed the lad, writhing and twisting to get his right knee up where he could use it to advantage.

Spooner, for it was the same man who had let the trap down under Steve on the tally-board platform, did not answer. He pressed the boy to him with a force that made the lad think his ribs were going to be crushed in. At the same time the man was trying to turn over and get Rush under him, where he would have quickly settled his young antagonist.

All at once the Iron Boy jerked his knee up, planting it in the other's abdomen. Now the more Spooner hugged Rush, the harder did the knee press against him. With a mighty effort the rascal threw himself on his side. But in doing so he had relaxed his grip. Steve's right arm was jerked loose, and like a flash the Iron Boy delivered two short-arm jolts on the side of his opponent's jaw. [253]

The blows half stunned the big man. Steve struck him in the nose with a blow that was intended to reach the jaw and complete the work.

At that instant there was a shout from down the level. Bob Jarvis came charging upon the scene.

Steve recognized the voice of his companion.

"I've got him, Bob!" shouted the lad with what little breath he had left. "I've got him down and out!"

But Spooner was not quite "down and out" yet. He began fighting again in sheer desperation. His one thought now was to free himself from the grip of those young arms of steel.

Bob grasped Spooner by the collar, and after a few violent tugs jerked the fellow free from Steve's embrace. Spooner staggered to his feet.

Bang!

Bob smote him a terrific blow on the jaw, and Spooner dropped in a heap. He was going to strike the man again when Steve stopped him.

"Get a rope, quick! I'll take care of him. There's some rope over there by the pumps."

Steve threw the prisoner over on his face, twisting the man's hands behind his back, and a few minutes later they had the fellow's hands securely tied behind his back. [254]

About that time the pump-man came running up.

"Telephone to the superintendent that we have the man," commanded Steve. "Hurry, now! Don't stop to ask questions. Tell him we are bringing the fellow up in the skip."

Spooner by this time had recovered sufficiently to walk with an Iron Boy on each side of him. In that formation they made their way to the skip.

"None of your funny business now, unless you want another thump on the jaw," warned Jarvis threateningly.

Mr. Penton had not arrived when they reached the surface, so they took their prisoner to the dry house, leaving word with the skip-tender to send Mr. Penton over there at once.

The superintendent was not long in reaching the shaft, whence he hurried to the place indicated.

"Mr. Penton, we have caught the guilty man," announced Steve. "There he is."

"What—who is he?" demanded the official half unbelievably, peering sharply at the prisoner.

"On the pay roll he is John Klink. His other name is Spooner. He is stouter and has grown a beard since you saw him last." [255]

The superintendent uttered an exclamation of amazement. Steve briefly related all that had occurred. Under pressure, Spooner made a confession before they left the dry house that night of the whole miserable business. It was he who had dropped the dynamite into the shaft. But he declared that it was his partner, Marvin, also working in the mine under an assumed name, who had lured Steve Rush to the lower level and pushed him in. It was Marvin, too, who, by thrusting a monkey wrench into the machinery, had stripped the gear and put the cage mechanism out of business.

That night the villainous and revengeful Spooner slept in a cell, where he was destined to remain until his trial and eventual sentence to a long term in prison.

Marvin somehow got wind of the capture of his associate in crime and fled. He was never heard from in those parts again.

On the following Monday morning the private car of the visiting officials once more drew up at the railroad station. Later in the day the Iron Boys were again summoned to the office of the superintendent. They supposed it was for a discussion of the Spooner case with Mr. Penton. They were surprised to find the officials of the company there awaiting them. [256]

After greeting the lads, Mr. Carrhart made a little speech in which he paid a glowing tribute to

the brave boys, and at its conclusion he placed a packet in the hands of each.

At the meeting of the officials there, a few days previous, it had been decided by vote to make the lads a present. The packets contained these presents. The lads protested, but Mr. Carrhart was almost sternly insistent.

Upon arriving home Steve and Bob each found in his packet shares of stock in the big steel company amounting to one thousand dollars. It was a small fortune for them, yet they had earned it. At least the officials of the steel company considered that they had.

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Transcriber Note

Minor spelling and punctuation errors have been corrected.

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