

Henty George Alfred

**Facing Death: or, The Hero of
the Vaughan Pit: A Tale of
the Coal Mines**



George Henty

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Henty G. A. George Alfred Facing Death Or The Hero of the Vaughan Pit: A Tale of the Coal Mines

CHAPTER I. EVIL TIDINGS

A row of brick-built houses with slate roofs, at the edge of a large mining village in Staffordshire. The houses are dingy and colourless, and without relief of any kind. So are those in the next row, so in the street beyond, and throughout the whole village. There is a dreary monotony about the place; and if some giant could come and pick up all the rows of houses, and change their places one with another, it is a question whether the men, now away at work, would notice any difference whatever until they entered the houses standing in the place of those which they had left in the morning. There is a church, and a vicarage half hidden away in the trees in its pretty old-fashioned garden; there are two or three small red-bricked dissenting chapels, and the doctor's house, with a bright brass knocker and plate on the door. There are no other buildings above the common average of mining villages; and it needs not the high chimneys, and engine-houses with winding gear, dotting the surrounding country, to notify the fact that Stokebridge is a mining village.

It is a little past noon, and many of the women come to their doors and look curiously after a miner, who, in his working clothes, and black with coal-dust, walks rapidly towards his house, with his head bent down, and his thick felt hat slouched over his eyes.

"It's Bill Haden; he works at the 'Vaughan.'"

"What brings he up at this hour?"

"Summat wrong, I'll be bound."

Bill Haden stopped at the door of his house in the row first spoken of, lifted the latch, and went in. He walked along a narrow passage into the back-room. His wife, who was standing at the washing-tub, turned round with a surprised exclamation, and a bull-dog with half-a-dozen round tumbling puppies scrambled out of a basket by the fire, and rushed to greet him.

"What is it, Bill? what's brought thee home before time?"

For a moment Bill Haden did not answer, but stooped, and, as it were mechanically, lifted the dog and stroked its head.

"There's blood on thy hands, Bill. What be wrong with 'ee?"

"It bain't none of mine, lass," the man said in an unsteady voice. "It be Jack's. He be gone."

"Not Jack Simpson?"

"Ay, Jack Simpson; the mate I ha' worked with ever since we were butties together. A fall just came as we worked side by side in the stall, and it broke his neck, and he's dead."

The woman dropped into a chair, threw her apron over her head, and cried aloud, partly at the loss of her husband's mate, partly at the thought of the narrow escape he had himself had.

"Now, lass," her husband said, "there be no time to lose. It be for thee to go and break it to his wife. I ha' come straight on, a purpose. I thawt to do it, but I feel like a gal myself, and it had best be told her by another woman."

Jane Haden took her apron from her face.

"Oh, Bill, how can I do it, and she ill, and with a two-month baby? I misdoubt me it will kill her."

"Thou'st got to do it," Bill said doggedly, "and thou'd best be quick about it; it won't be many minutes afore they bring him in."

When Bill spoke in that way his wife knew, as he said, that she'd got to do it, and without a word she rose and went out, while her husband stood staring into the fire, and still patting the bulldog in his arms. A tear falling on his hand startled him. He dropped the dog and gave it a kick, passed his sleeve across his eyes, and said angrily:

"Blest if I bain't a crying like a gal. Who'd a thawt it? Well, well, poor old Jack! he was a good mate too" – and Bill Haden proceeded to light his pipe.

Slowly and reluctantly Mrs. Haden passed along the row. The sad errand on which she was going was one that has often to be discharged in a large colliery village. The women who had seen Bill go in were still at their doors, and had been joined by others. The news that he had come in at this unusual hour had passed about quickly, and there was a general feeling of uneasiness among the women, all of whom had husbands or relatives below ground. When, therefore, Jane Haden came out with signs of tears on her cheeks, her neighbours on either side at once assailed her with questions.

"Jack Simpson's killed by a fall," she said, "and I ha' got to break it to his wife."

Rapidly the news spread along the row, from door to door, and from group to group. The first feeling was everywhere one of relief that it was not their turn this time; then there was a chorus of pity for the widow. "It will go hard with her," was the general verdict. Then the little groups broke up, and went back to their work of getting ready for the return of their husbands from the pit at two o'clock. One or two only, of those most intimate with the Simpsons, followed Jane Haden slowly down the street to the door of their house, and took up a position a short distance off, talking quietly together, in case they might be wanted, and with the intention of going in after the news was broken, to help comfort the widow, and to make what preparations were needed for the last incoming of the late master of the house. It was but a minute or two that they had to pause, for the door opened again, and Jane Haden beckoned them to come in.

It had, as the gossips had predicted, gone hard with the young widow. She was sitting before the fire when Jane entered, working, and rocking the cradle beside with her foot. At the sight of her visitor's pale face, and tear-stained cheeks, and quivering lips, she had dropped her work and stood up, with a terrible presentiment of evil – with that dread which is never altogether absent from the mind of a collier's wife. She did not speak, but stood with wide-open eyes staring at her visitor.

"Mary, my poor girl," Mrs. Haden began.

That was enough, the whole truth burst upon her.

"He is killed?" she gasped.

Mrs. Haden gave no answer in words, but her face was sufficient as she made a step forward towards the slight figure which swayed unsteadily before her. Mary Simpson made no sound save a gasping sob, her hand went to her heart, and then she fell in a heap on the ground, before Mrs. Haden, prepared as she was, had time to clasp her.

"Thank God," Jane Haden said, as she went to the front door and beckoned the others in, "she has fainted."

"Ay, I thawt as much," one of the women said, "and a good job too. It's always best so till he is brought home, and things are straightened up."

Between them Mary Simpson was tenderly lifted, and carried upstairs and laid on the bed of a lodger's room there. The cradle was brought up and put beside it, and then Jane Haden took her seat by the bed, one woman went for the doctor, while the others prepared the room below. In a short time all that remained of Jack Simpson was borne home on a stretcher, on the shoulders of six of his fellow-workmen, and laid in the darkened room. The doctor came and went for the next two days, and then his visits ceased.

It had gone hard with Mary Simpson. She had passed from one long fainting fit into another, until at last she lay as quiet as did Jack below; and the doctor, murmuring "A weak heart, poor little woman; the shock was too much for her," took his departure for the last time from the house. Then

Jane Haden, who had not left her friend's side ever since she was carried upstairs, wrapped the baby in a shawl and went home, a neighbour carrying the cradle.

When Bill Haden returned from work he found the room done up, the table laid for tea, and the kettle on the fire. His wife was sitting by it with the baby on her lap.

"Well, lass," he said, as he entered the room, "so the poor gal's gone. I heard it as I came along. Thou'st's had a hard two days on't. Hulloo! what's that?"

"It's the baby, Bill," his wife said.

"What hast brought un here for?" he asked roughly.

Jane Haden did not answer directly, but standing in front of her husband, removed the handkerchief which covered the baby's face as he lay on her arm.

"Look at him, Bill; he's something like Jack, don't thou see it?"

"Not a bit of it," he said gruffly. "Kids don't take after their father, as pups do."

"I can see the likeness quite plain, Bill. Now," she went on, laying her hand on his shoulder, "I want to keep him. We ain't got none of our own, Bill, and I can't abear the thought of his going to the House."

Bill Haden stood irresolute.

"I shouldn't like to think of Jack's kid in the House; still he'll be a heap of trouble – worse nor a dozen pups, and no chance of winning a prize with him nohow, or of selling him, or swopping him if his points don't turn out right. Still, lass, the trouble will be thine, and by the time he's ten he'll begin to earn his grub in the pit; so if thy mind be set on't, there's 'n end o' the matter. Now let's have tea; I ain't had a meal fit for a dog for the last two days, and Juno ain't got her milk regular."

So little Jack Simpson became a member of the Haden family, and his father and mother were laid to rest in the burying-ground on the hillside above the village.

CHAPTER II. BULL-DOG

A curious group as they sit staring into the fire. Juno and Juno's daughter Bess, brindles both, with their underhanging lower jaws, and their black noses and wrinkled faces, and Jack Simpson, now six years old, sitting between them, as grave and as immovable as his supporters. One dog is on either side of him and his arms are thrown round their broad backs. Mrs. Haden is laying the table for her husband's return; she glances occasionally at the quiet group in front of the fire, and mutters to herself: "I never did see such a child in all my born days."

Presently a sudden and simultaneous pricking of the closely-cropped ears of Juno and Bess proclaim that among the many footsteps outside they have detected the tread of their master.

Jack accepts the intimation and struggles up to his feet just as Bill Haden lifts the latch and enters.

"It's a fine day, Bill," his wife said.

"Be it?" the collier replied in return. "I took no note o't. However it doant rain, and that's all I cares for. And how's the dogs? Did you give Juno that physic ball I got for her?"

"It's no manner of use, Bill, leaving they messes wi' me. I ha' tould you so scores o' times. She woant take it from me. She sets her jaws that fast that horses could na pull 'em apart, and all the while I'm trying she keeps oop a growl like t' organ at the church. She's a' right wi'out the physic, and well nigh pinned Mrs. Brice when she came in to-day to borrow a flatiron. She was that frightened she skirled out and well nigh fainted off. I had to send Jack round to the "Chequers" for two o' gin before she came round."

"Mrs. Brice is a fool and you're another," Bill said. "Now, ooman, just take off my boots for oim main tired. What be you staring at, Jack? Were you nearly pinning Mother Brice too?"

"I doant pin folk, I doant," Jack said sturdily. "I kicks 'em, I do, but I caught hold o' Juno's tail, and held on. And look 'ee here, dad, I've been a thinking, doant 'ee lift I oop by my ears no more, not yet. They are boath main sore. I doant believe neither Juno nor Bess would stand bein lifted oop by their ears, not if they were sore. I be game enough, I be, but till my ears be well you must try some other part. I expect the cheek would hurt just as bad, so you can try that."

"I do wish, Bill, you would not try these tricks on the boy. He's game enough, and if you'd ha' seen him fighting to-day with Mrs. Jackson's Bill, nigh twice as big as himself, you'd ha' said so too; but it ain't Christian-like to try children the same way as pups, and really his ears are sore, awful sore. I chanced t' notice 'em when I washed his face afore he went to school, and they be main bad, I tell 'ee."

"Coom here," the miner said to Jack. "Aye, they be sore surely; why didn't 'ee speak afore, Jack? I doant want to hurt 'ee, lad."

"I wa'n't going to speak," Jack said. "Mother found it out, and said she'd tell 'ee o't; but the last two nights I were well nigh yelping when 'ee took me up."

"You're a good plucked 'un, Jack," Bill Haden said, "and I owt not t' ha done it, but I didn't think it hurt 'ee, leastways not more nor a boy owt to be hurt, to try if 'ee be game!"

"And what's you and t' dogs been doing to-day, Jack?" the miner asked, as he began at his dinner.

"We went for a walk, dad, after school, out in the lanes; we saw a big black cat, and t' dogs chased her into a tree, then we got 't a pond, and d'ye know, dad, Bess went in and swam about, she did!"

"She did?" the miner said sharply. "Coom here, Bess;" and leaving his meal, he began anxiously to examine the bull-dog's eyes and listened attentively to her breathing. "That were a rum start for a bull too, Jack. She doant seem to ha' taken no harm, but maybe it ain't showed itself. Mother, you

give her some hot grub t' night. Doant you let her go in t' water again, Jack. What on airth made her tak it into her head to go into t' water noo, I wonder?"

"I can't help it if she wants to," Jack said; "she doant mind I, not when she doant want to mind. I welted her t'other day when she wanted to go a't parson's coo, but she got hold o' t' stick and pulled it out o' my hand."

"And quite raight too," Bill Haden said; "don't 'ee try to welt they dogs, or I'll welt thee!"

"I doant care," the child said sturdily; "if I goes out in charge o' they dogs, theys got to mind me, and how can I make 'em mind me if I doant welt 'em? What would 'ee say to I if Bess got had up afore the court for pinning t' parson's coo?"

As no ready reply occurred to Bill Haden to this question he returned to his meal. Juno and Bess watched him gravely till he had finished, and then, having each received a lump of meat put carefully aside for them, returned to the fire. Jack, curling himself up beside them, lay with his head on Juno's body and slept till Mrs. Haden, having cleared the table and washed up the things, sent him out to play, her husband having at the conclusion of his meal lighted his pipe and strolled over to the "Chequers."

Bill Haden had, according to his lights, been a good father to the child of his old mate Simpson. He treated him just as if he had been his own. He spent twopence a day less in beer than before, and gave his wife fourteen pence in addition to her weekly money for household expenses, for milk for the kid, just as he allowed twopence a day each for bones for Juno and Bess. He also when requested by his wife handed over what sum was required for clothing and shoes, not without grumbling, however, and comparisons as to the wants of dorgs and boys, eminently unfavourable to the latter. The weekly twopence for schooling Mrs. Haden had, during the year that Jack had been at school, paid out of her housekeeping money, knowing that the expenses of the dogs afforded no precedent whatever for such a charge.

Bill Haden was, however, liberal to the boy in many ways, and when in a good temper would often bestow such halfpence as he might have in his pocket upon him, and now and then taking him with him into town, returned with such clothes and shoes that "mother" held up her hands at the extravagance.

Among his young companions Jack was liked but feared. When he had money he would purchase bull's-eyes, and collecting all his acquaintances, distribute them among them; but he was somewhat sedate and old-fashioned in his ways, from his close friendships with such thoughtful and meditative animals as Juno and Bess, and when his wrath was excited he was terrible. Never uttering a cry, however much hurt, he would fight with an obstinacy and determination which generally ended by giving him the victory, for if he once got hold of an antagonist's hair – pinning coming to him naturally – no amount of blows or ill-treatment could force him to leave go until his agonized opponent confessed himself vanquished.

It was not often, however, that Jack came in contact with the children of his own age. His duties as guardian of the "dorgs" absorbed the greater part of his time, and as one or both of these animals generally accompanied him when he went beyond the door, few cared about having anything to say to him when so attended; for the guardianship was by no means entirely on his side, and however excellent their qualities and pure their breed, neither Juno nor Bess were animals with whom strangers would have ventured upon familiarity.

Jack's reports to his "dad" of Bess's inclination to attack t' parson's coo was not without effect, although Bill Haden had made no remark at the time. That night, however, he observed to his wife: "I've been a thinking it over, Jane, and I be come to the opinion that it's better t' boy should not go out any more wi' t' dorgs. Let 'em bide at home, I'll take 'em oot when they need it. If Bess takes it into her head to pin a coo there might be trouble, an I doan't want trouble. Her last litter o' pups brought me a ten pun note, and if they had her oop at 'a court and swore her life away as a savage brute, which she ain't no way, it would pretty nigh break my heart."

The execution of this, as of many other good intentions, however, was postponed until an event happened which led to Jack's being definitely relieved of the care of his canine friends.

Two years had passed, when one morning Jack was calmly strolling along the road accompanied by Juno and Bess. A gig came rapidly along containing two young bagmen, as commercial travellers were still called in Stokebridge. The driver, seeing a child with two dogs, conceived that this was a favourable opportunity for a display of that sense of playful humour whose point lies in the infliction of pain on others, without any danger of personal consequences to the inflictor.

With a sharp sweep he brought down his whip across Jack's back, managing to include Bess in the stroke.

Jack set up a shout of mingled pain and indignation, and stooping for a stone, hurled it after the man who had struck him. Bess's response to the assault upon her was silent, but as prompt and far more effectual. With two springs she was beside the horse, and leaping up caught it by the nostrils and dragged it to the ground.

Juno at once joined in the fray, and made desperate attempts to climb into the gig and seize its inmates, who had nearly been thrown out as the horse fell.

Recovering himself, the driver, pale with terror, clubbed his whip, and struck at Juno with the butt-end.

"Don't 'ee hit her," Jack cried as he arrived on the spot; "if thou dost she'll tear 'ee limb from limb."

"Call the brute off, you little rascal," cried the other, "it's killing the horse."

"Thou'd best keep a civil tongue in thy head," the child said coolly, "or it will be bad for 'ee. What did 'ee hit I and Bess for? It would serve 'ee roight if she had pinned 'ee instead o' t' horse."

"Call them off," the fellow shouted as Juno's teeth met in close proximity to his leg.

"It be all very well to say call 'em orf," Jack said, "but they doan't moind I much. Have 'ee got a strap?"

The man hastily threw down a strap, and this Jack passed through Juno's collar, she being too absorbed in her efforts to climb into the gig to heed what the child was doing; then he buckled it to the wheel.

"Noo," he said, "ye can light down t' other side. She caan't reach 'ee there."

The young men leapt down, and ran to the head of the horse; the poor brute was making frantic efforts to rise, but the bull-dog held him down with her whole might.

Jack shouted and pulled, but in vain; Bess paid no attention to his voice.

"Can you bite his tail?" one of the frightened men said; "I've heard that is good."

"Boite her tail!" Jack said in contempt; "doan't yer see she's a full-bred un; ye moight boite her tail off, and she would care nowt about 't. I've got summat here that may do."

He drew out a twisted paper from his pocket.

"This is snuff," he said; "if owt will make her loose, this will. Now one o' yer take holt by her collar on each side, and houl't tight, yer know, or she'll pin ye when she leaves go o' the horse. Then when she sneezes you pull her orf, and houl't fast."

The fear of the men that the horse would be killed overpowered their dread of the dog, and each took a firm grip upon its collar. Then Jack placed a large pinch of snuff to its nostrils. A minute later it took effect, the iron jaws unclosed with a snap, and in an instant Bess was snatched away from the horse, which, delivered from its terrible foe, sank back groaning on the road. Bess made the most furious attempts to free herself from her captors, but in vain, and Juno strained desperately at the strap to come to the assistance of her offspring.

"Ha' ye got another strap?" Jack asked.

"There's a chain in the box under the seat."

Jack with some difficulty and an amount of deliberation for which the men could gladly have slain him, climbed up into the gig, and presently came back with the chain.

"Noo tak' her round to t' other side o' gig," he said; "we'll fasten her just as Juno is."

When Bess was securely chained to the wheel the men ran to raise the horse, who lay with its head in a pool of blood.

"There's a pond in yon field," Jack said, "if 'ee wants water."

After Bess was secured Jack had slipped round to Juno, and kept his hand upon the buckle in readiness to loose her should any attempt be made upon his personal safety. The men, however, were for the moment too scared to think of him. It was some time before the horse was got on to its legs, with a wet cloth wrapped round its bleeding wound. Fortunately Bess's grip had included the bit-strap as well as the nostrils, and this had somewhat lessened the serious nature of the hurt.

Jack had by this time pacified the dogs, and when the men looked round, after getting the horse on to its legs, they were alarmed to see him standing by quietly holding the dogs by a strap passing through their collar.

"Doan't 'ee try to get into that ere cart," he said; "you've got to go wi' me back to Stokebridge to t' lock-ooop for hitting I and Bess. Now do you walk quietly back and lead t' horse, and oi'll walk beside 'ee, and if thou mov'st, or tries to get away, oi'll slip t' dogs, you see if I doan't."

"You little villain," began one of the men furiously, but a deep growl from Bess in reply to the angry tone at once silenced him; and burning with rage they turned the horse's head back towards the village and walked on, accompanied by Jack and his dogs on guard.

The arrival of this procession created much excitement, and a crowd of women and children soon gathered. Jack, however, serenely indifferent to questions and shouts, proceeded coolly on his way until he arrived at the residence of the local constable, who, hearing the din, appeared at his door.

"Maister Johnson," the child says, "I give them chaps in charge for saulting I and Bess."

"And we give this little ruffian in charge," shouted the men, secure that, in face of the constable and crowd, Jack could not loose his terrible bull-dogs, "for setting his dogs at us, to the risk of our lives and the injury of our horse, which is so much hurt that we believe it will have to be killed."

Just at this moment Bill Haden – who had returned from work at the moment that a boy running in reported that there was a row, that a horse was covered wi' blood, and two chaps all bluidy over t' hands and clothes, were agoing along wi' Jack and t' dorgs oop street to lock-ooop – arrived upon the spot.

"What's oop, lad?" he asked as he came up.

"They chaps hit I and Bess, dad, and Bess pinned t' horse, and Juno would ha' pinned 'em boath hadn't I strapped she oop, and then we got Bess orf, and I brought 'em back to t' lock-ooop."

"How dar 'ee hit my lad?" Bill Haden said angrily, stepping forward threateningly.

"Look oot, dad, or t' dogs will be at 'em again," Jack shouted.

Bill seized the strap from the child's hand, and with a stern word silenced the dogs.

"Well," the constable said, "I can't do nowt but bring both parties afore Mr. Brook i' the morning. I suppose I needn't lock 'ee all oop. Bill, will you bind yourself to produce Jack Simpson t'morrow?"

"Ay," said Bill, "oi'll produce him, and he'll produce hissself, I'm thinking; seems to me as Jack be able to take 's own part."

This sally was received with laughter and applause, for local feeling was very strong in Stokebridge, and a storm of jeers and rough chaff were poured upon the bagmen for having been brought in prisoners by a child.

"Thee'd best get away to th' inn," the constable said, "else they'll be a stoaning thee next. There be only two on us here, and if they takes to 't we sha'n't be able to do much."

So the men, leading their horse, went off to the Inn, groaned and hooted at by the crowd on the way. On their arrival a messenger was at once sent off for a veterinary surgeon who resided some four miles away.

On the following morning the parties to the quarrel, the two bagmen and the injured horse on the one hand, and Jack Simpson with the two bull-dogs under charge of Bill Haden on the other, appeared before Mr. Brook, owner of the Vaughan pit and a county magistrate.

Jack first gave his account of the transaction, clearly and with much decision.

"I war a walking along quiet wi' t' dogs," he said, "when I hears a cart a coming from Stokebridge. I looks round and seed they two chaps, but didn't mind no further about it till as they came oop that sandy-haired chap as was a driving lets me and Bess ha' one which made me joomp, I can tell 'ee. Bess she pinned the horse, and Juno she tried to get into t' cart at 'em. They were joost frightened, they hollers, and yawps, and looks as white as may be. I fastens Juno oop wi' a strap and they houlds Bess while I poot some snoof t' her nose."

"Put what?" Mr. Brook asked.

"Joost a pinch of snoof, sir. I heard feyther say as snoof would make dogs loose, and so I bought a haporth and carried it in my pocket, for th' dogs don't moind oi when they are put oot. And then they gets horse oop and I makes 'em come back to t' lock-ooop, but maister Johnson," he said, looking reproachfully at the constable, "wouldn't lock 'em oop as I wanted him."

There was some laughter among the audience, and even the magistrate smiled. The young men then gave their story. They denied point blank that either of them had struck Jack, and described him as having set his dog purposely on the horse. Jack had loudly contradicted them, shouting, 'That's a lee;' but had been ordered to silence. Then drawing back he slipped off his jacket and shirt, and when the evidence was closed he marched forward up to the magistrate bare to the waist.

"Look at moi back," he said; "that 'ull speak for itself."

It did; there was a red weal across the shoulder, and an angry hiss ran through the court at the prisoners, which was with difficulty suppressed.

"After what I have seen," Mr. Brook said, "there is no doubt whatever in my mind that the version given by this child is the correct one, and that you committed a cowardly and unprovoked assault upon him. For this you," he said to the man who had driven the horse, "are fined £5 or a month's imprisonment. It is a good thing that cowardly fellows like you should be punished occasionally, and had it not been that your horse had been severely injured I should have committed you to prison without option of a fine. Against you," he said to the other, "there is no evidence of assault. The charge against the child is dismissed, but it is for the father to consider whether he will prosecute you for perjury. At the same time I think that dogs of this powerful and ferocious kind ought not to be allowed to go out under the charge of a child like this."

The man paid the fine; but so great was the indignation of the crowd that the constable had to escort them to the railway-station; in spite of this they were so pelted and hustled on the way that they were miserable figures indeed when they arrived there.

And so Jack was released from all charge of the "dorgs," and benefited by the change. New friendships for children of his own age took the place of that for the dogs, and he soon took part in their games, and, from the energy and violence with which, when once excited, he threw himself into them, became quite a popular leader. Mrs. Haden rejoiced over the change; for he was now far more lively and more like other children than he had been, although still generally silent except when addressed by her and drawn into talk. He was as fond as ever of the dogs, but that fondness was now a part only instead of the dominating passion of his existence. And so months after months went on and no event of importance occurred to alter the current of Jack Simpson's life.

CHAPTER III. THE RESOLUTION

An artist sitting in the shade under a tree, painting a bit of rustic gate and a lane bright with many honeysuckles. Presently he is conscious of a movement behind him, and looking round, sees a sturdily built boy of some ten years of age, with an old bull-dog lying at his feet, and another standing by his side, watching him.

"Well, lad, what are you doing?"

"Nowt!" said the boy promptly.

"I mean," the artist said with a smile, "have you anything to do? if not, I will give you sixpence to sit still on that gate for a quarter of an hour. I want a figure."

The boy nodded, took his seat without a word, and remained perfectly quiet while the artist sketched him in.

"That will do for the present," the artist said. "You can come and sit down here and look at me at work if you like; but if you have nothing to do for an hour, don't go away, as I shall want you again presently. Here is the sixpence; you will have another if you'll wait. What's your name?" he went on, as the boy threw himself down on the grass, with his head propped up on his elbows.

"Bull-dog," the lad said promptly; and then colouring up, added "at least they call me Bull-dog, but my right name be Jack Simpson."

"And why do they call you Bull-dog, Jack?"

The artist had a sympathetic voice and spoke in tones of interest, and the lad answered frankly:

"Mother – that is, my real mother – she died when I were a little kid, and Juno here, she had pups at the time – not that one, she's Flora, three years old she be – and they used to pretend she suckled me. It bain't likely, be it?" he asked, as if after all he was not quite sure about it himself. "Schoolmaster says as how it's writ that there was once two little rum'uns, suckled by a wolf, but he can't say for sure that it's true. Mother says it's all a lie, she fed me from a bottle. But they called me Bull-dog from that, and because Juno and me always went about together; and now they call me so because," and he laughed, "I take a good lot of licking before I gives in."

"You've been to school, I suppose, Jack?"

"Yes, I've had five years schooling," the boy said carelessly.

"And do you like it?"

"I liked it well enough; I learnt pretty easy, and so 'scaped many hidings. Dad says it was cos my mother were a schoolmaster's daughter afore she married my father, and so learning's in the blood, and comes natural. But I'm done with school now, and am going down the pit next week."

"What are you going to do there? You are too young for work."

"Oh, I sha'n't have no work to do int' pit, not hard work – just to open and shut a door when the tubs go through."

"You mean the coal-waggons?"

"Ay, the tubs," the boy said. "Then in a year or two I shall get to be a butty, that ull be better pay; then I shall help dad in his stall, and at last I shall be on full wages."

"And after that?" the artist asked.

The lad looked puzzled.

"What will you look forward to after that?"

"I don't know that there's nowt else," the boy said, "except perhaps some day I might, perhaps – but it ain't likely – but I might get to be a viewer."

"But why don't you make up your mind to be something better still, Jack – a manager?"

"What!" exclaimed the boy incredulously; "a manager, like Fenton, who lives in that big house on the hill! Why, he's a gentleman."

"Jack," the artist said, stopping in his work now, and speaking very earnestly, "there is not a lad of your age in the land, brought up as a miner, or a mechanic, or an artisan, who may not, if he sets it before him, and gives his whole mind to it, end by being a rich man and a gentleman. If a lad from the first makes up his mind to three things – to work, to save, and to learn – he can rise in the world. You won't be able to save out of what you get at first, but you can learn when your work is done. You can read and study of an evening. Then when you get better wages, save something; when, at twenty-one or so, you get man's wages, live on less than half, and lay by the rest. Don't marry till you're thirty; keep away from the public-house; work, study steadily and intelligently; and by the time you are thirty you will have a thousand pounds laid by, and be fit to take a manager's place."

"Do'st mean that, sir?" the boy asked quickly.

"I do, Jack. My case is something like it. My father was a village schoolmaster. I went when about twelve years old to a pottery at Burslem. My father told me pretty well what I have told you. I determined to try hard at any rate. I worked in every spare hour to improve myself generally, and I went three evenings a week to the art school. I liked it, and the master told me if I stuck to it I might be a painter some day. I did stick to it, and at twenty could paint well enough to go into that branch of pottery. I stuck to it, and at five-and-twenty was getting as high pay as any one in Burslem, except one or two foreign artists. I am thirty now. I still paint at times on china, but I am now getting well known as an artist, and am, I hope, a gentleman."

"I'll do it," the boy said, rising slowly to his feet and coming close to the artist. "I'll do it, sir. They call me Bull-dog, and I'll stick to it."

"Very well," the artist said, holding out his hand; "that's a bargain, Jack. Now, give me your name and address; here are mine. It's the 1st of June to-day. Now perhaps it will help you a little if I write to you on the 1st of June every year; and you shall answer me, telling me how you are getting on, and whether I can in any way give you help or advice. If I don't get an answer from you, I shall suppose that you have got tired of it and have given it up."

"Don't you never go to suppose that, sir," the boy said earnestly. "If thou doesn't get an answer thou'llt know that I've been killed, as father was, in a fall or an explosion. Thank you, sir." And the boy walked quietly off, with the old bull-dog lazily waddling behind him.

"There are the makings of a man in that boy," the artist said to himself. "I wish though I had finished his figure before we began to talk about his plans for the future. I shall be very proud of that boy if he ever makes a name for himself."

That evening Jack sat on a low stool and gazed into the fire so steadily and silently that Bill Haden, albeit not given to observe his moods, asked:

"What ail'st, lad? What be'st thinkin' o'?"

Jack's thoughts were so deep that it took him some time to shake them off and to turn upon his stool.

"Oi'm thinking o' getting larning."

"Thinking o' getting larning!" the miner repeated in astonishment, "why, 'ee be just a dun o' getting larning. 'Ee ha' been at it for the last foive year, lad, and noo thou'st going to be done wi' it and to work in the pit."

"Oi'm a going to work in the pit, dad, and oi'm a gwine to get larning too. Oi've made oop my mind, and oi'm gwine to do it."

"But bain't 'ee got larning?" the miner said. "Thou canst read and write foine, which is more nor I can do and what dost want more?"

"Oi'm a going to get larning," Jack said again, steadily repeating the formula, "and oi'm gwine soom day to be a manager."

Bill Haden stared at the boy and then burst into a fit of laughter. "Well, this bangs a'."

Mrs. Haden was as surprised but more sympathetic.

"Bless the boy, what hast got in your head now?"

Jack showed not the slightest sign of discomfiture at his father's laughter.

"I met a chap to-day," he said in answer to Mrs. Haden, "as told I that if I made up my moind to work and joost stuck to 't, I could surely make a man o' myself, and might even roise soom day to be a manager; and I'm a going to do it."

"Doant 'ee say a word to check the boy, Bill," Mrs. Haden said to her husband, as he was about to burst out into jeering remarks. "I tell 'ee, what Jack says he sticks to, and you oughter know that by this time. What the man, whos'ever he might be, said, was right, Jack," she went on, turning to the boy. "Larning is a great thing. So far you ain't showed any turn for larning, Jack, as I ever see'd, but if you get it you may raise yourself to be an overman or a viewer, though I doan't say a manager; that seems too far away altogether. If you stick to what you say you may do it, Jack. I can't help you in larning, for I ain't got none myself, but if I can help you in any other way I 'ull, and so 'ull feyther, though he does laugh a bit."

"He be roight enough to laugh," Jack said, "for I hain't had any turn that way, I doant know as I ha' now, but I'm a going to try, and if trying can do it," he said in his steady tones, "oi'll do it. I think I ha' got some o' the bull-dog strain in me, and I'll houl't on to it as Bess would houl't on to a man's throat if she pinned him."

"I know you will, my lad," Mrs. Haden said, while her husband, lighting his pipe and turning to go out, said:

"It matters nowt to me one way or t'other, but moind, lad, larning or no larning, thou'st got to go into the pit next week and arn your living."

"Jack," Mrs. Haden said presently, "dost know, I wouldn't do nowt wi' this new fancy o' thine, not till arter thou'st a been to work i' the pit for a while; a week or two will make no differ to 'ee, and thou doan't know yet how tired ye'll be when ye coom oop nor how thou'lt long for the air and play wi' lads o' thy own age. I believe, Jack, quite believe that thou be'st in arnest on it, and I know well that when thou dost begin thou'lt stick to 't. But it were better to wait till thou know'st what 'tis thou art undertaking."

Jack felt that there was a good deal in what his mother said. "Very well, mother. 'Twant make no differ to me, but oi'll do as th' asks me."

CHAPTER IV. THE VAUGHAN PIT

Among the group of men and boys assembled round the mouth of the Vaughan pit on the 7th of June were two little lads, Jack Simpson and Harry Shepherd, who were to make the descent for the first time. The boys were fast friends. Harry was the taller but was slighter than Jack, and far less sturdy and strong. Both were glad that they were to go into the pit, for although the life of a gate-boy is dull and monotonous, yet in the pit villages the boys look forward to it as marking the first step in a man's life, as putting school and lessons behind, and as raising them to a position far in advance of their former associates.

Nowadays the law has stepped in, and the employment of such mere children in the mines is forbidden, but at that time it had not been changed, and if a boy was big enough to shut a door he was big enough to go into a mine.

"Dost feel skeary, Jack?" Harry asked.

"Noa," Jack said; "what be there to be skeary aboot? I bean't afeard of the dark, and they say in time 'ee get used to it, and can see pretty nigh loike a cat. There be dad a calling. Good-bye, Harry, I'll see thee to-night."

The yard of the Vaughan resembled that of other large collieries. It was a large space, black and grimy, on which lines of rails were laid down in all directions; on these stood trains of waggons, while here and there were great piles of coal. In the centre rose up a lofty scaffolding of massive beams. At the top of this was the wheel over which a strong wire rope or band ran to the winding engine close by, while from the other end hung the cage, a wooden box some six feet square. At the corner of this box were clips or runners which fitted on to the guides in the shaft and so prevented any motion of swinging or swaying. So smoothly do these cages work that, standing in one as it is lowered or drawn up, only a very slight vibration or tremor tells that you are in motion. Near the square house in which stood the winding engine was another precisely similar occupied by the pumping engine.

The Vaughan was worked by a single shaft divided by a strong wooden partition into two, one of these known as the downcast shaft, that is, the shaft through which the air descends into the mine, the other the upcast, through which the current, having made its way through all the windings and turnings of the roadways below, again ascends to the surface. This system of working by a single shaft, however, is very dangerous, as, in the event of an explosion, both shafts may become involved in the disaster and there will be no means of getting at the imprisoned miners. Nowadays all well-regulated mines have two shafts, one at a distance from the other, but this was less common thirty years back, and the Vaughan, like most of its neighbours, was worked with a single shaft.

Each miner before descending went to the lamp-room and received a lighted "Davy." As almost every one is aware, the principle of this lamp, and indeed of all that have since been invented, is that flame will not pass through a close wire-gauze. The lamp is surrounded with this gauze, and although, should the air be filled with gas to an explosive point, it will ignite if it comes in contact with flame, the gauze prevents the light of the lamp from exploding the gas-charged air outside. When the air is of a very explosive character even the Davy-lamps have to be extinguished, as the heat caused by the frequent ignitions within the lamp raises the gauze to a red heat, and the gas beyond will take fire.

Jack took his place in the cage with Bill Haden and as many others as it could contain. He gave a little start as he felt a sudden sinking; the sides of the shaft seemed to shoot up all round him, wet, shining, and black. A few seconds and the light of day had vanished, and they were in darkness, save that overhead was a square blue patch of sky every moment diminishing in size.

"Be'st afeard, Jack?" Bill Haden asked, raising his lamp so as to get a sight of the boy's face.

"Noa, why should I?" Jack said; "I heard 'ee say that the ropes were new last month, so there ain't nothin to be afeard on!"

"That is the young un they call Bull-dog, ain't it, Bill?"

"Ay!" Bill Haden answered; "he's game, he is; you can't make him yelp. I've licked him till I was tired, but he never whimpered. Now then, out you go;" and as the cage stopped the men all stepped out and started for the places in which they were working.

"Coom along, Jack; the viewer told me to put you at No. 10 gate."

It was ten minutes fast – and as Jack thought very unpleasant – walking. The sleepers on which the rails for the corves, or little waggons, were laid, were very slippery. Pools of water stood between them and often covered them, and blocks of coal of all sizes, which had shaken from the corves, lay in the road. When it was not water it was black mud. Sometimes a line of waggons full or empty stood on the rails, and to pass these they had to squeeze against the damp walls. Before he reached his post the gloss of Jack's new mining clothes had departed for ever. The white jumper was covered with black smears, and two or three falls on the slippery wooden sleepers had effectively blackened his canvas trousers.

"There, lad," Bill Haden said at length, holding his lamp high to afford a general view of the situation; "that's your place."

"The place" was a hollow like a cupboard, some five feet high, two deep, and a little wider. There was a wooden seat in it, a peg or two had been driven into the rock to hang things from, and a handful or so of hay upon the ground showed that Jack's predecessor had an idea of comfort.

"There you are, and not a bad place either, Jack. You see this cord? Now when thou hearst a team of corves coming along, pull yon end and open the door. When they have passed let go the cord and the door shuts o' 'tself, for it's got a weight and pulley. It's thy business to see that it has shut, for if a chunk of coal has happened to fall and stops the door from shutting, the ventilation goes wrong and we all goes to kingdom come in no time. That's all thou'st got to do 'cept to keep awake. Of course you woan't do that; no boy does. So that you larn to wake up when the corves come along, that ull do foine."

"But if I doan't?" Jack asked.

"Well, if thou doan't thou'lt get waked with a cuff o' th' ear by the driver, and it depends on what sort o' chap he be how hard the cuff thou'lt get. I doan't think thou'lt feel lonely here, for along that side road they bring down other corves and the horse comes and takes 'em on. On this main road the horses go through to the upper end of the mine, half a mile farther."

"How do it make a differ whether this door be open or shut, father?"

"Well, lad, the air comes up the road we ha come by. Now it's wanted to go round about by the workings on that side road. This door be put to stop it from going by the straight road, so there's nothing for it but for to go round by the workings, maybe for a mile, maybe three miles, till it gets back into the main road again. So when the door is open the ventilation is checked right round the workings; so mind doan't 'ee open the door till the horse is close to it, and shut it directly it's past."

When the door closed behind his foster-father, and Jack Simpson remained alone in the dense darkness, a feeling of utter loneliness and desertion stole over him. The blackness was intense and absolute; a low confused murmur, the reverberation of far-off noises in the pit, sounded in his ears. He spoke, and his voice sounded muffled and dull.

"This be worse nor I looked for," the boy said to himself; "I suppose I'll get used to it, but I doan't wonder that some young uns who ain't strong as I be are badly frighted at first."

Presently the confused noise seemed to get louder, then a distinct rumble was heard, and Jack felt with delight that a train of waggons was approaching. Then he saw far along the gallery a light swinging, as the man who bore it walked ahead of the horse. The water in the little pools between the sleepers reflected it in a score of little lines of light. Now he could hear the hollow splashing sound of the horses' hoofs, and prepared to answer to the shout of "door" by pulling at the string beside him.

When the light came within twenty yards it changed its direction; he heard the grating of the wheels against the points, and saw that the waggons were going up the other road. There upon a siding they came to a stop, and a minute or two later a number of full waggons were brought down by another horse. A few words were exchanged by the drivers, but Jack's ear, unaccustomed to the echoes of a mine, could not catch what they said; then the first man hitched his horse on to the full waggons, and started for the shaft, while the other with the empties went up the road to the workings.

The incident, slight as it had been, had altogether dissipated the feeling of uneasiness of which Jack had been conscious. Before, he had seemed shut out from the world, as if within a living tomb, but the sight of men engaged at their ordinary work close by him completely restored the balance of his mind, and henceforth he never felt the slightest discomfort at being alone in the dark.

A few minutes after the rumbling of the departing train of "tubs" had died in his ear, he again heard it. Again he watched the slowly approaching light, and when it came within a few yards of him he heard the expected shout of "Gate!" He replied by a shout of "All right!" and as the driver came level with him pulled the cord and the door opened.

"G'long, Smiler," the driver said, and the horse went forward. The man leaned forward and raised his lamp to Jack's face.

"I thawt 'twasn't Jim Brown's voice. Who be'st thou?"

"Jack Simpson; I live along wi' Bill Haden."

"Ay, ay, I know'st, I knew thy father, a good sort he was too. Be'st thy first day doon the pit?"

"Ay," Jack said.

"Foind it dark and lonesome, eh? Thou'lt get used to it soon."

"How often do the corves come along?" Jack asked as the man prepared to run on after the waggons, the last of which had just passed.

"There be a set goes out every ten minutes, maybe, on this road, and every twenty minutes on the other, two o' ours to one o' theirs;" and he moved forward.

Jack let the door slam after him, went out and felt that it had shut firmly, and then resumed his seat in his niche. He whistled for a bit, and then his thoughts turned to the learning which he had determined firmly to acquire.

"I wish I'd ha' took to it afore," he said to himself. "What a sight o' time I ha' lost! I'll go over in my head all the lessons I can remember; and them as I doant know, and that's the best part, I reckon I'll look up when I get hoame. Every day what I learns fresh I'll go over down here. I shall get it perfect then, and it will pass the time away finely. I'll begin at oncet. Twice two is four;" and so Jack passed the hours of his first day in the pit, recalling his lessons, reproaching himself continually and bitterly with the time he had wasted, breaking off every ten minutes from his rehearsals to open the door for the train of corves going in empty and going out full, exchanging a few words each time with the drivers, all of whom were good-naturedly anxious to cheer up the new boy, who must, as they supposed, be feeling the loneliness of his first day in the pit keenly. Such was by no means the case with Jack, and he was quite taken by surprise when a driver said to him, "This be the last train this shift."

"Why, it bean't nigh two o'clock, surely?" he said.

"It be," the driver said; "wants ten minutes, that's all."

Soon the miners began to come along.

"Hullo, Jack!" Bill Haden's voice said. "Be'st still here. Come along of me. Why didst stop, lad? Thou canst always quit thy post when the first man comes through on his way out. Hast felt it lonely, lad?"

"Not a bit, dad."

"That's strange too," Bill said. "Most young boys finds it awful lonely o' first. I know I thowt that first day were never coming to an end. Weren't frighted at t' dark?"

"I thought it was onnatural dark and still the first ten minutes," Jack admitted honestly; "but arter the first set o' corves came along I never thawt no more about the dark."

"Here we are at the shaft, joomp in, there's just room for you and me."

CHAPTER V. SETTING TO WORK

A week after Jack Simpson had gone to work in the "Vaughan" there was a knock one evening at the door of the schoolmaster of the Stokebridge National School.

"Please, Mr. Merton, can I speak to 'ee?"

"What, is that you, Jack Simpson!" the schoolmaster said, holding the candle so that its light fell upon the boy before him. "Yes, come in, my boy." The lad followed him into the parlour. "Sit down, Jack. Now what is it? Nothing the matter at home, I hope?"

"Noa, sir. I wanted to ask 'ee what books I orter read, so that I may grow up a clever man?"

"Bless me, Jack," Mr. Merton said, "why, I never expected this from you."

"Noa, sir, but I ha' made up my mind to get on, and I means to work hard. I ha' been told, sir, that if I studies at books in all my spare time, and saves my money, and works well, I may get up high some day;" and the boy looked wistfully up in the master's face for a confirmation of what had been told him.

"That's quite right, Jack, whoever told you. Hard work, study, thrift, and intelligence will take any lad from the bottom of the tree to the top. And you are quite in earnest, Jack?"

"Quite, sir."

The schoolmaster sat in silence for a little time.

"Well, my boy, for a bit you must work at ordinary school-books, and get a fair general knowledge, and be careful to observe the way things are expressed – the grammar, I mean; read aloud when you are alone, and try in speaking to get rid of "thees" and "thous," and other mistakes of speech. I can lend you ordinary school-books, fit for you for the next four or five years, and will always explain any difficulties you may meet with. The books you will want afterwards you can buy second-hand at Wolverhampton or Birmingham. But there will be time to talk about that hereafter. What time have you to study? You have gone into the Vaughan pit, have you not?"

"Yes, sir. I ha' time enough all day, for I ha' nowt to do but just to open and shut a door when the tubs come along; but I ha' no light."

"The time must seem very long in the dark all day."

"It do seem long, sir; and it will be wuss when I want to read, and know I am just wasting time. But I can read at home after work, when dad goes out. It's light now, and I could read out o' doors till nine o'clock. Mother would give me a candle now and again; and I should get on first rate in the pit, but the Vaughan is a fiery vein, and they ha' nowt but Daveys."

"Well, my boy, here are a few books, which will suit you for a time. Let me know how you are getting on; and when you have mastered the books, let me know. Remember you want to learn them thoroughly, and not just well enough to rub through without getting the strap. But don't overdo it. You are a very small boy yet, and it is of as much importance for your future life that you should grow strong in body as well as in brain. So you must not give up play. If you were to do nothing but sit in the dark, and to study at all other times, you would soon become a fool. So you must give time to play as well as to work. Remember, do not be cast down with difficulties; they will pass by if you face them. There is an old saying, 'God helps those who help themselves.' And look here, Jack, I can tell you the best way to make the time pass quickly while you are in the dark. Set yourself sums to do in your head. You will find it difficult at first, but it will come easier with practice, and as you get on I will give you a book on 'mental arithmetic,' and you will find that there is nothing more useful than being able to make complicated calculations in your head."

The next six months passed quickly with Jack Simpson. He started early with his father for the pit, and the hours there, which at first had seemed so long, slipped by rapidly as he multiplied,

and added, and subtracted, finding that he could daily master longer lines of figures. Of an afternoon he played with the other pit boys, and after that worked steadily at his books till eleven o'clock, two hours after Bill Haden and his wife had gone to bed. Once a week he went in the evening to Mr. Merton, who was astonished at the progress that the boy was making, and willingly devoted an hour to explaining difficulties and helping him on with his work.

Satisfied now that the boy was in earnest, Mr. Merton a few days afterwards took occasion, when Mr. Brook, the owner of the Vaughan mine, called in on school business, to tell him how one of the pit boys was striving to educate himself.

"He is really in earnest, Merton; it is not a mere freak?"

"No, Mr. Brook, the lad will stick to it, I'm sure. He goes by the nickname of Bull-dog, and I don't think he is badly named; he has both the pluck and the tenacity of one."

"Very well, Merton; I am glad you spoke to me about it. I wish a few more boys would try and educate themselves for viewers and underground managers; it is difficult indeed to get men who are anything but working miners. I'll make a note of his name."

A few days afterwards Mr. Brook, after going through the books, went over the mine with the underground manager.

"Do the waggons often get off the metals along this road, Evans?" he asked, stopping at one of the doors which regulate the ventilation.

"Pretty often, sir; the rails are not very true, and the sleepers want renewing."

"It would be as well if there were an extra light somewhere here; it would be handy. This is Number Ten door, is it not?"

"Yes sir."

"Who is this? a new hand, is he not?" raising his lamp so as to have a full look at the lad, who was standing respectfully in the niche in the rock cut for him.

"Yes, sir; he is the son of a hand who was killed in the pit some ten years ago – Simpson."

"Ah! I remember," Mr. Brooks said. "Well, serve the boy a lamp out when he goes down of a day. You'll be careful with it, lad, and not let it fall?"

"Oh yes, sir," Jack said, in a tone of delight; "and, please, sir, may I read when I am not wanted?"

"Certainly you may," his master said; "only you must not neglect your work;" and then Mr. Brook went on, leaving Jack so overjoyed that for that afternoon at least his attempts at mental arithmetic were egregious failures.

CHAPTER VI. "THE OLD SHAFT."

In the corner of a rough piece of ground near the "Vaughan" was situated what was known as the old shaft. It had been made many years before, with a view to working coal there. The owners of the Vaughan, which at the time was just commencing work, had, however, bought up the ground, and as it adjoined their own and could be worked in connection with it, they stopped the sinking here. This was so long ago that the rubbish which had formed a mound round the mouth of the shaft had been long covered with vegetation, and a fence placed round the pit had fallen into decay.

The shaft had been sunk some fifty fathoms, but was now full of water, to within forty feet of the surface. Some boards covered the top, and the adventurous spirits among the boys would drop stones through the openings between them, and listen to the splash as they struck the water below, or would light pieces of paper and watch them falling into the darkness, until they disappeared suddenly as they touched the water.

The winch used in the process of excavation remained, and round it was a portion of the chain so old and rusty as to be worthless for any purpose whatever. Lengths had from time to time been broken off by boys, who would unwind a portion, and then, three or four pull together until the rust-eaten links gave way; and the boys came to the ground with a crash. It was a dirty game, however, dirty even for pit boys, for the yellow rust would stick to hands and clothes and be very difficult to remove.

One Saturday afternoon a group of boys and girls of from ten to fourteen were playing in the field. Presently it was proposed to play king of the castle, or a game akin thereto, half a dozen holding the circular mound round the old pit, while the rest attacked them and endeavoured to storm the position. For some time the game went on with much shouting on the part of the boys and shrill shrieks from the girls, as they were pulled or pushed down the steep bank.

"Let us make a charge a' together," said Jack Simpson, who although not thirteen was the leader of the attacking party.

Then heading the rush he went at full speed at the castle. Harry Shepherd, who was one of the defenders, was at the top, but Jack had so much impetus that he gained his footing and thrust Harry violently backwards.

The top of the bank was but three feet wide, and within sloped down to the mouth of the old pit shaft, fifteen feet below. Harry tottered, and to avoid falling backwards turned and with great strides ran down the bank. He was unable to arrest his course, but went through the rotten fence and on to the boarding of the shaft. There was a crash, a wild cry, and Harry disappeared from the sight of his horror-stricken companions. The rotten wood-work had given way and the boy had fallen into the old shaft.

A panic seized the players, some rushed away at the top of their speed shouting, "Harry Shepherd has fallen down the old shaft!" others stood paralysed on the top of the mound; girls screamed and cried. Two only appeared to have possession of their wits. The one was Jack Simpson, the other was a girl of about twelve, Nelly Hardy. Jack did not hesitate an instant, but quickly ran down to the shaft, Nelly more quietly, but with an earnest set face, followed him. Jack threw himself down by the edge and peered down the shaft.

"Harry, Harry," he shouted, "bee'st killed?" A sort of low cry came up.

"He be alive, he be drowning," Jack exclaimed, "quick, get off them boards."

Nelly at once attempted to aid Jack to lift the boards aside.

"Coom," Jack shouted to the boys on the top, "what bee'st feared of? Thou art shamed by this lass here. Coom along and help us."

Several of the boys hurried down, stung by Jack's taunt, and half the boards were soon pulled off.

"What bee'st goin' to do, Jack?"

"Go down, to be sure," Jack said. "Catch hold o' th' windlass."

"The chain woan't hold you, Jack."

"It maun hold me," Jack said.

"It woan't hold two, Jack."

"Lower away and hold thee jaw," Jack said; "I am going to send him up first if he be alive; lower away, I say."

Jack caught hold of the end of the rusty chain, and the boys lowered away as rapidly as they could.

Jack held on stoutly, and continued to shout, "Hold on, Harry, I be a-coming; another minute and I'll be with 'ee."

The chain held firmly, and Jack swung downward safely.

The shaft was of considerable size, and the openings in the planks had enabled the air to circulate freely, consequently there was no bad air. As Jack reached the water he looked eagerly round, and then gave a cry of joy. Above the water he saw a hand grasping a projecting piece of rock.

Harry could not swim, but he had grasped the edge of a projecting stone near which he had fallen, and when his strength had failed, and he had sunk below the surface, his hand still retained its grasp.

"Lower away," Jack shouted, and the chain was slackened.

Jack could swim a little, just enough to cross the Stokebridge Canal where the water was only out of his depth for some fifteen feet in the middle. First he took off his handkerchief from his neck, a strong cotton birdseye, and keeping hold of the chain before him swam to the spot where the hand was above water. He had a terrible fear of its slipping and disappearing below the dark pool, and was careful to make a firm grasp at it. He was surprised to find the body was of no weight. Without a moment's delay he managed to bind the wrist fast to the chain with his handkerchief.

"Above there," he shouted.

"Ay," came down.

"Wind up very steadily, don't jerk it now." Slowly the winch revolved and the body began to rise from the water.

Jack clung to the stone which Harry had grasped and looked upwards. He wondered vaguely whether it would ever reach the top; he wondered whether the arm would pull out of the socket, and the body plump down into the water; he wondered how long he could hold on, and why his clothes seemed so heavy. He wondered whether, if his strength went before the chain came down again, his hand would hold on as Harry's had done, or whether he should go down to the bottom of the shaft. How far was it! Fifty fathoms, three hundred feet; he was fifty below the mouth, two hundred and fifty to sink; how long would his body be getting to the bottom? What would his mother and Bill Haden say? Would they ever try to get his body up?

He was growing very weak. As from another world he had heard the shout from above when the body of Harry Shepherd reached the brink, and afterwards some vague murmurs. Presently his fingers slipped and he went down in the black pool. The chill of the water to his face, the sudden choking sensation, brought his senses back for a moment and he struck to the surface.

There, touching the water, he saw the chain, and as he grasped it, heard the shouts of his comrades above calling to him. He was himself again now. The chain being some feet below the surface he managed to pass it round him, and to twist it in front. He was too exhausted to shout.

He saw a great piece of paper on fire fluttering down, and heard a shout as its light showed him on the end of the chain; then he felt a jar and felt himself rising from the water; after that he knew nothing more until he opened his eyes and found himself lying on the bank.

Nelly Hardy was kneeling by him and his head was in her lap. He felt various hands rubbing him and slapping the palms of his hands; his animation was quickly restored. He had swallowed but little water, and it was the close air of the shaft which had overpowered him.

"Hallo!" he said, shaking himself, "let me up, I be all right; how's Harry?"

Harry had not yet come round, though some of them, trying to restore him to consciousness, said that they had heard him breathe once. Jack as usual took the command, ordered all but two or three to stand back, told Nelly Hardy to lift Harry's head and undo his shirt, stripped him to the waist, and then set the boys to work to rub vigorously on his chest. Whether the efforts would have been successful is doubtful, but at this moment there was a sound of hurrying feet and of rapid wheels.

Those who had started at the first alarm had reached the village and told the news, and most fortunately had met the doctor as he drove in from his rounds. A man with a rope had leaped into the gig, and the doctor as he drove off had shouted that hot blankets were to be prepared.

When he reached the spot and heard that Harry had been brought to bank, he leapt out, climbed the mound, wrapped him in his coat, carried him down to his gig, and then drove back at full speed to Stokebridge, where with the aid of hot blankets and stimulants the lad was brought back to consciousness.

Jack Simpson was the hero of the hour, and the pitmen, accustomed to face death as they were, yet marvelled at a boy trusting himself to a chain which looked unfit to bear its own weight only, and into the depth of a well where the air might have been unfit to breathe.

Jack strenuously, and indeed angrily, disclaimed all credit whatever.

"I didn't think nowt about the chain, nor the air, nor the water neither. I thought only o' Harry. It was me as had pushed him down, and I'd got to bring him oop. If I hadn't a gone down Nelly Hardy would ha' gone, though she be a lass and doan't know how to swim or to hold on by a chain, or nowt; but she'd ha' gone, I tell e'e, if I hadn't; I saw it in her face. She didn't say nowt, but she was ready to go. If she hadn't gone down to th' shaft none of them would ha' gone. She's a rare plucked 'un, she is, I tell e'e."

But in spite of Jack's indignant repudiation of any credit, the brave action was the talk of Stokebridge and of the neighbouring pit villages for some time. There are no men appreciate bravery more keenly than pitmen, for they themselves are ever ready to risk their lives to save those of others. Consequently a subscription, the limit of which was sixpence and the minimum a penny, was set on foot, and a fortnight later Jack was presented with a gold watch with an inscription.

This was presented in the school-room, and Mr. Brook, who presided at the meeting, added on his own account a chain to match. It needed almost force on the part of Bill Haden to compel Jack to be present on this occasion. When he was led up, flushed with confusion, to Mr. Brook, amid the cheers of the crowd of those in the room, he listened with head hung down to the remarks of his employer.

When that gentleman finished and held out the watch and chain, Jack drew back and held up his head.

"I doan't loike it, sir; I pushed Harry in, and in course I went down to pick him out; besides, Harry's my chum, he be; was it loikely I should stand by and he drowning? I tell 'ee, sir, that you ain't said a word about the lass Nelly Hardy; she had pluck, she had. The boys ran away or stood and stared, but she came down as quiet as may be. I tell 'ee, sir, her face was pale, but she was as steady and as still as a man could ha' been, and did as I told her wi'out stopping for a moment and wi'out as much as saying a word. She'd ha' gone down if I'd told her to. Where be ye, Nelly Hardy? coom oot and let me show ye to Mr. Brook."

But Nelly, who was indeed in the building, had shrunk away when Jack began to speak, and having gained the door, was on the point of flying, when she was seized and brought forward, looking shamefaced and sullen.

"That be her, sir," Jack said triumphantly, "and I say this watch and chain ought to be hers, for she did much more for a lass than I did for a boy, and had no call to do't as I had."

"I cannot give them to her, Jack," Mr. Brook said, "for the watch has been subscribed for you; but as a token of my appreciation of the bravery and presence of mind she has shown, I will myself present her with a silver watch and chain, with an inscription saying why it was given to her, and this she will, I am sure, value all her life."

Perhaps she would, but at present her only thought was to get away. Her hair was all rough, she had on a tattered dress, and had only slipped in when those in charge of the door were intent upon hearing Mr. Brook's address. Without a word of thanks, the instant the hands restraining her were loosed she dived into the crowd and escaped like a bird from a snare. Satisfied that justice had been done, Jack now said a few words of thanks to his employer and the subscribers to his present, and the meeting then broke up, Jack returning with Bill Haden and his mother, both beaming with delight.

"I be roight down glad, lad, I doan't know as I've been so glad since Juno's dam won the first prize for pure-bred bull-dogs at the Birmingham show. It seems joost the same sort o' thing, doan't it, Jane?"

CHAPTER VII. FRIENDSHIP

Nelly Hardy had been unfortunate in her parents, for both drank, and she had grown up without care or supervision. She had neither brother nor sister. At school she was always either at the top or bottom of her class according as a fit of diligence or idleness seized her. She was a wild passionate child, feeling bitterly the neglect with which she was treated, her ragged clothes, her unkempt appearance. She was feared and yet liked by the girls of her own age, for she was generous, always ready to do a service, and good-tempered except when excited to passion. She was fonder of joining with the boys, when they would let her, in their games, and, when angered, was ready to hold her own against them with tooth and nail.

So wild were her bursts of passion that they were sources of amusement to some of the boys, until Jack upon one occasion took her part, and fought and conquered the boy who had excited her. This was on the Saturday before the accident had taken place.

For some days after the presentation no one saw her; she kept herself shut up in the house or wandered far away.

Then she appeared suddenly before Jack Simpson and Harry Shepherd as they were out together.

"I hate you, Jack Simpson," she said, "I hate you, I hate you;" and then dashed through the gap in the hedge by which she had come.

"Well," Harry exclaimed in astonishment, "only to think!"

"It be nat'ral enough," Jack said, "and I bain't surprised one bit. I orter ha' known better. I had only to ha' joodged her by myself and I should ha' seen it. I hated being dragged forward and talked at; it was bad enough though I had been made decent and clean scrubbed all over, and got my Soonday clothes on, but of course it would be worse for a lass anyway, and she was all anyhow, not expecting it. I ought to ha' known better; I thawt only o' my own feelings and not o' hers, and I'd beg her pardon a hundred times, but 'taint likely she'd forgive me. What is she a doing now?"

The lads peered through the hedge. Far across the field, on the bank, the other side, lay what looked like a bundle of clothes.

"She be a crying, I expect," Jack said remorsefully. "I do wish some big chap would a come along and give I a hiding; I wouldn't fight, or kick, or do nowt, I would just take it, it would serve me roight. I wonder whether it would do her any good to let her thrash me. If it would she'd be welcome. Look here, Harry, she bain't angry wi' you. Do thou go across to her and tell her how main sorry I be, and that I know I am a selfish brute and thought o' myself and not o' her, and say that if she likes I will cut her a stick any size she likes and let her welt me just as long as she likes wi'out saying a word."

Harry was rather loath to go on such an errand, but being imperatively ordered by Jack he, as usual, did as his comrade wished. When he approached Nelly Hardy he saw that the girl was crying bitterly, her sobs shaking her whole body.

"I be coom wi' a message," he began in a tone of apprehension, for he regarded Nelly as resembling a wild cat in her dangerous and unexpected attacks.

The girl leapt to her feet and turned her flushed tear-stained cheeks and eyes, flashing with anger through the tears, upon him.

"What dost want, Harry Shepherd? Get thee gone, or I'll tear the eyes from thy head."

"I doan't coom o' my own accord," Harry said steadily, though he recoiled a little before her fierce outburst. "I came on the part o' Jack Simpson, and I've got to gi' you his message even if you do fly at me. I've got to tell you that he be main sorry, and that he feels he were a selfish brute in a thinking o' his own feelings instead o' thine. He says he be so sorry that if 'ee like he'll cut a stick o'

any size you choose and ull let you welt him as long as you like wi'out saying a word. And when Jack says a thing he means it, so if you wants to wop him, come on."

To Harry's intense surprise the girl's mood changed. She dropped on the ground again, and again began to cry.

After standing still for some time and seeing no abatement in her sobs, or any sign of her carrying out the invitation of which he had been the bearer, Jack's emissary returned to him.

"I guv her your message, Jack, and she said nowt, but there she be a crying still."

"Perhaps she didn't believe you," Jack said; "I'd best go myself."

First, with great deliberation, Jack chose a hazel stick from the hedge and tried it critically. When fully assured that it was at once lissom and tough, and admirably adapted for his purpose, he told Harry to go on home.

"Maybe," Jack said, "she mayn't loike to use it and you a looking on. Doan't 'ee say a word to no un. If she likes to boast as she ha' welted me she ha' a roight to do so, but doan't you say nowt."

Jack walked slowly across the field till he was close to the figure on the ground. Then he quietly removed his jacket and waistcoat and laid them down. Then he said:

"Now, Nelly, I be ready for a welting, I ha' deserved it if ever a chap did, and I'll take it. Here's the stick, and he's a good un and will sting rare, I warrant."

The girl sat up and looked at him through her tears.

"Oh, Jack, and didst really think I wanted to welt thee?"

"I didn't know whether thou didst or no, Nelly, but thou said thou hate'st me, and wi' good reason, so if thou likest to welt me here's the stick."

The girl laughed through her tears. "Ah! Jack, thou must think that I am a wild cat, as John Dobson called me t'other day. Throw away that stick, Jack. I would rather a thousand times that thou laidst it on my shoulders than I on thine."

Jack threw away the stick, put on his coat and waistcoat, and sat down on the bank.

"What is it then, lass? I know I were cruel to have thee called forward, but I didn't think o't; but I had rather that thou beat me as I orter be beaten, than that thou should go on hating me."

"I doan't hate thee, Jack, though I said so; I hate myself; but I like thee better nor all, thou art so brave and good."

"No braver than thou, Nelly," Jack said earnestly; "I doan't understand why thou should first say thou hates me and then that thou doan't; but if thou are in earnest, that thou likest me, we'll be friends. I don't mean that we go for walks together, and such like, as some boys and girls do, for I ha' no time for such things, and I shouldn't like it even if I had; but I'll take thy part if anyone says owt to thee, and thou shalt tell me when thou art very bad at hoam" – for the failings of Nelly's parents were public property. "Thou shalt be a friend to me, not as a lass would be, but as Harry is, and thou woan't mind if I blow thee up, and tells 'ee of things. Thou stook to me by the side o' the shaft, and I'll stick to thee."

"I'll do that," the girl said, laying her hand in his. "I'll be thy friend if thou'lt let me, not as lasses are, but as lads."

And so the friendship was ratified, and they walked back together to the village. When he came to think it over, Jack was inclined to repent his bargain, for he feared that she would attach herself to him, and that he would have much laughter to endure, and many battles to fight. To his surprise Nelly did nothing of the sort. She would be at her door every morning as he went by to the pit and give him a nod, and again as he returned. Whenever other girls and boys were playing or sitting together, Nelly would make one of the group. If he said, as he often did say, "You, Nell Hardy come and sit by me," she came gladly, but she never claimed the place. She was ready to come or to go, to run messages and to do him good in any way.

Jack had promised she should be his friend as Harry was, and as he got to like her more he would ask her or tell her to accompany them in their walks, or to sit on a low wall in some quiet

corner and talk. Harry, stirred by his friend's example, had begun to spend half an hour a day over his old school-books.

"Why dost like larning so much, Jack?" Nelly asked, as Jack was severely reproaching his friend with not having looked at a book for some days; "what good do it do?"

"It raises folk in the world, Nell, helps 'em make their way up."

"And dost thou mean to get oop i' the world?"

"Ay, lass," Jack said, "if hard work can do it, I will; but it does more nor that. If a man knows things and loves reading it makes him different like, he's got summat to think about and talk about and care for beside public-houses and dorgs. Canst read, Nell?"

"No, Jack," she said, colouring. "It bain't my fault; mother never had the pence to spare for schooling, and I was kept at hoam to help."

Jack sat thoughtful for some time.

"Wouldst like to learn?"

"Ay."

"Well, I'll teach thee."

"Oh, Jack!" and she leapt up with flashing eyes; "how good thou be'est!"

"Doan't," Jack said crossly; "what be there good in teaching a lass to spell? There's twopence, run down to the corner shop and buy a spelling-book; we'll begin at once."

And so Nelly had her first lesson.

After that, every afternoon, as Jack came home from work, the girl would meet him in a quiet corner off the general line, and for five minutes he would teach her, not hearing her say what she had learned, but telling her fresh sounds and combinations of letters. Five or six times he would go over them, and expected – for Jack was tyrannical in his ways – that she would carry them away with her and learn them by heart, and go through them again and again, so that when he questioned her during their longer talks she would be perfect.

Then, the five minutes over, Jack would run on to make up for lost time, and be in as soon as Bill Haden.

But however accurately Jack expected his pupil to learn, his expectations were surpassed. The girl beyond clearing up the room had nothing to do, and she devoted herself with enthusiasm to this work. Once she had mastered simple words and felt her own progress, her shyness as to her ignorance left her. She always carried her book in her pocket, and took to asking girls the pronunciation of larger words, and begging them to read a few lines to her; and sitting on the door-step poring over her book, she would salute any passer-by with: "Please tell us what is that word." When she could read easily, which she learned to do in two or three months, she borrowed left-off school-books from the girls, and worked slowly on, and two years later had made up for all her early deficiencies, and knew as much as any of those who had passed through the school.

From the day of her compact of friendship with Jack her appearance and demeanour had been gradually changing. From the first her wild unkempt hair had been smoothly combed and braided, though none but herself knew what hours of pain and trouble it took her with a bit of a comb with three teeth alone remaining, to reduce the tangled mass of hair to order.

Her companions stared indeed with wonder on the first afternoon, when, thus transformed and with clean face, she came among them, with a new feeling of shyness.

"Why, it be Nelly Hardy!" "Why, Nell, what ha' done to t'ysself? I shouldn't ha' known ye."
"Well, ye be cleaned up surely."

The girl was half inclined to flame out at their greetings, but she knew that the surprise was natural, and laughed good-humouredly. She was rewarded for her pains when Jack and some other boys, passing on their way to play, Jack stopped a moment and said to her quietly, "Well done, lass, thou lookst rarely, who'd ha' thought thou wert so comely!"

As time went on Nelly Hardy grew altogether out of her old self. Sometimes, indeed, bursts of temper, such as those which had gained her the name of the "Wild Cat," would flare out, but these were very rare now. She was still very poorly dressed, for her house was as wretched as of old, but there was an attempt at tidiness. Her manner, too, was softer, and it became more and more quiet as things went on, and her playmates wondered again and again what had come over Nell Hardy; she had got to be as quiet as a mouse.

The boys at first were disposed to joke Jack upon this strange friendship, but Jack soon let it be understood that upon that subject joking was unacceptable.

"She stood by me," he said, "and I'm a-going to stand by her. She ain't got no friends, and I'm going to be her friend. She's quiet enough and doan't bother, no more nor if she were a dorg. She doan't get in no one's way, she doan't want to play, and sits quiet and looks on, so if any of you doan't like her near ye, you can go away to t' other side o' field. I wish she'd been a boy, 'twould ha' been fitter all ways, but she can't help that. She's got the sense o' one. and the pluck, and I like her. There!"

CHAPTER VIII. PROGRESS

"Bless me, lad, another poond o' candles! I never did hear o' sich waste," Mrs. Haden exclaimed as Jack entered the cottage on a winter's afternoon, two years and a half after he had gone into the pit. "Another poond o' candles, and it was only last Monday as you bought the last – nigh two candles a night. Thou wilt kill thyself sitting up reading o' nights, and thy eyes will sink i' thy head, and thou'lt be as blind as a bat afore thou'rt forty."

"I only read up to eleven, mother, that gives me six hours abed, and as thou know, six for a man, seven for a woman, is all that is needful; and as to the expense, as dad lets me keep all my earnings save five bob a week – and very good o' him it is; I doan't know no man in the pit as does as much – why, I ha' plenty o' money for my candles and books, and to lay by summat for a rainy day."

"Aye, aye, lad, I know thou be'st not wasteful save in candles; it's thy health I thinks o'."

"Health!" Jack laughed; "why, there ain't a lad in the pit as strong as I am of my age, and I ha' never ailed a day yet, and doan't mean to."

"What ha' ye been doing all the arternoon, Jack?"

"I ha' been sliding in the big pond wi' Harry Shepherd and a lot o' others. Then Dick Somers, he knocked down Harry's little sister Fan, as she came running across th' ice, and larfed out when she cried – a great brute – so I licked he till he couldn't see out o' his eyes."

"He's bigger nor thee, too," Mrs. Haden said admiringly.

"Aye, he's bigger," Jack said carelessly, "but he ain't game, Dick ain't; loses his temper, he does, and a chap as does that when he's fighting ain't o' no account. But I must not stand a clapping here; it's past six, and six is my time."

"Have your tea first, Jack, it's a' ready; but I do believe thou'dst go wi'out eating wi'out noticing it, when thou'st got thy books in thy head."

Jack sat down and drank the tea his mother poured out for him, and devoured bread and butter with a zest that showed that his appetite was unimpaired by study. As soon as he had finished he caught up his candle, and with a nod to Mrs. Haden ran upstairs to his room.

Jack Simpson's craze for learning, as it was regarded by the other lads of Stokebridge, was the subject of much joking and chaff among them. Had he been a shy and retiring boy, holding himself aloof from the sports of his mates, ridicule would have taken the place of joking, and persecution of chaff. But Jack was so much one of themselves, a leader in their games, a good fellow all round, equally ready to play or to fight, that the fact that after six o'clock he shut himself up in his room and studied, was regarded as something in the nature of a humorous joke.

When he had first begun, his comrades all predicted that the fit would not last, and that a few weeks would see the end of it; but weeks and months and years had gone by, and Jack kept on steadily at the work he had set himself to do. Amusement had long died away, and there grew up an unspoken respect for their comrade.

"He be a rum 'un, be Jack," they would say; "he looves games, and can lick any chap his age anywhere round, and yet he shoots himself oop and reads and reads hours and hours every day, and he knows a heap, Bull-dog does." Not that Jack was in the habit of parading his acquirements; indeed he took the greatest pains to conceal them and to show that in no respect did he differ from his playfellows.

The two hours which he now spent twice a week with Mr. Merton, and his extensive reading, had modified his rough Staffordshire dialect, and when with his master he spoke correct English almost free of provincialisms, although with his comrades of the pit he spoke as they spoke, and never introduced any allusion to his studies. All questions as to his object in spending his evenings with his

books were turned aside with joking answers, but his comrades had accidentally discovered that he possessed extraordinary powers of calculation. One of the lads had vaguely said that he wondered how many buckets of water there were in the canal between Stokebridge and Birmingham, a distance of eighteen miles, and Jack, without seeming to think of what he was doing, almost instantaneously gave the answer to the question. For a moment all were silent with surprise.

"I suppose that be a guess, Jack, eh?" Fred Orme asked.

"Noa," Jack said, "that's aboot roight, though I be sorry I said it; I joost reckoned it in my head."

"But how didst do that, Jack?" his questioner asked, astonished, while the boys standing round stared in silent wonder.

"Oh! in my head," Jack said carelessly; "it be easy enough to reckon in your head if you practise a little."

"And canst do any sum in thy head, Jack, as quick as that?"

"Not any sum, but anything easy, say up to the multiplication or division by eight figures."

"Let's try him," one boy said.

"All right, try away," Jack said. "Do it first on a bit of paper, and then ask me."

The boys drew off in a body, and a sum was fixed upon and worked out with a great deal of discussion.

At last, after a quarter of an hour's work, when all had gone through it and agreed that it was correct, they returned and said to him, "Multiply 324,683 by 459,852." Jack thought for a few seconds and then taking the pencil and paper wrote down the answer: 149,306,126,916.

"Why, Jack, thou be'est a conjurer," one exclaimed, while the others broke out into a shout of astonishment.

From that time it became an acknowledged fact that Jack Simpson was a wonder, and that there was some use in studying after all; and after their games were over they would sit round and ask him questions which they had laboriously prepared, and the speed and accuracy of his answers were a never-failing source of wonder to them.

As to his other studies they never inquired; it was enough for them that he could do this, and the fact that he could do it made them proud of him in a way, and when put upon by the pitmen it became a common retort among them, "Don't thou talk, there's Jack Simpson, he knows as much as thee and thy mates put together. Why, he can do a soom as long as a slaate as quick as thou'd ask it."

Jack himself laughed at his calculating powers, and told the boys that they could do the same if they would practise, believing what he said; but in point of fact this was not so, for the lad had an extraordinary natural faculty for calculation, and his schoolmaster was often astonished by the rapidity with which he could prepare in his brain long and complex calculations, and that in a space of time little beyond that which it would take to write the question upon paper.

So abnormal altogether was his power in this respect that Mr. Merton begged him to discontinue the practice of difficult calculation when at work.

"It is a bad thing, Jack, to give undue prominence to one description of mental labour, and I fear that you will injure your brain if you are always exercising it in one direction. Therefore when in the pit think over other subjects, history, geography, what you will, but leave calculations alone except when you have your books before you."

CHAPTER IX. THE GREAT STRIKE

It was Saturday afternoon, a time at which Stokebridge was generally lively. The men, (dinner over, and the great weekly wash done,) usually crowded the public-houses, or played bowls and quoits on a piece of waste land known as "the common," or set off upon a spree to Birmingham or Wolverhampton, or sat on low walls or other handy seats, and smoked and talked. But upon this special Saturday afternoon no one settled down to his ordinary pursuits, for the men stood talking in groups in the street, until, as the hour of four approached, there was a general move towards the common. Hither, too, came numbers of men from the colliery villages round, until some four or five thousand were gathered in front of an old "waste tip" at one corner of the common. Presently a group of some five or six men came up together, made their way through the throng, and took their stand on the edge of the tip, some twenty feet above the crowd. These were the delegates, the men sent by the union to persuade the colliers of Stokebridge and its neighbourhood to join in a general strike for a rise of wages.

The women of the village stand at their doors, and watch the men go off to the meeting, and then comment to each other concerning it.

"I ain't no patience wi' 'em, Mrs. Haden," said one of a group of neighbours who had gathered in front of her house; "I don't hold by strikes. I have gone through three of 'em, bad un's, besides a score of small un's, and I never knowed good come on 'em. I lost my little Peg in the last – low fever, the doctor called it, but it was starvation and nothing more."

"If I had my way," said Mrs. Haden, "I'd just wring the heads off they delegates. They come here and 'suades our men to go out and clem rather than take a shilling a week less, just a glass o' beer a day, and they gets their pay and lives in comfort, and dunna care nowt if us and th' childer all dies off together."

"Talk o' woman's rights, as one hears about, and woman's having a vote; we ought to have a vote as to strikes. It's us as bears the worse o't, and we ought to have a say on't; if we did there wouldn't be another strike in the country."

"It's a burning shame," another chimed in; "here us and the childer will have to starve for weeks, months may be, and all the homes will be broke up, and the furniture, which has took so long to get together, put away, just because the men won't do with one glass of beer less a day."

"The union's the curse of us a'," Mrs. Haden said. "I know what it'll be – fifteen bob a week for the first fortnight, and then twelve for a week, and then ten, and then eight, and then six, and then after we've clemmed on that for a month or two, the union'll say as the funds is dry, and the men had best go to work on the reduction. I knows their ways, and they're a cuss to us women."

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