

Otis James

Down the Slope



James Otis
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CHAPTER I

THE BREAKER BOY

"Jest moved here, eh?"

"Came last Friday."

"And you are going into the breaker?"

"Yes."

"For thirty-five cents a day?"

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

"Were you ever in a mine before?"

"I never even saw one."

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

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

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

"I won't get into debt."

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

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

"I'm Bill Thomas' butty."

"What's that?"

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

"Were you ever in the breaker?"

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

"What's your name?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Green?"

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

"What must I do?"

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

"Is that all?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I can't stop now."

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

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

"I'm afraid not."

"But I promised to come straight home."

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

"I don't owe you anything."

"Don't eh?"

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

"What of that?"

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

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

"Of course it is."

"Then what about payin' your footing?"

"My footing?"

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

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

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

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

"You can get an advance at the store."

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

"That's about the size of it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

THE WARNING

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

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

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

"Are you goin' to fight?"

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

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

"Why not?"

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

"Who is Skip Miller?"

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

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

"He'll chew you all up."

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

"I had a mighty strong s'picion."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

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

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

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

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

"The warnin' has come."

"What do you mean by that?"

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

"PAy OR SkiP.
WE MEAN BiSNEss.
No SNEAkS LoWED HEAR.
ToNiTE iS THE LAsT CHANcE.
THE BReAkER REGulATERS."

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

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

"Do you belong?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Now you have got yourself in a scrape!"

"How so?"

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

"What of that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When are you going?"

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

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

"But the boys who are watching for you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who's got the rope?"

"I have."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But how'll he get out?"

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

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

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

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

"What are you going to do now?"

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

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

"That's jest what this is goin' to be. We're lettin' you off of a poundin' so's to show what can be done, an' if you say so much as a word to old Donovan we'll pretty near kill you."

"I shall talk to whoever I please."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III IN THE SHAFT

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then you believe something serious has happened."

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

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

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

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

Donovan looked hard at the speaker, and Miller retorted:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You will drown some of your own mates."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's about the size of it."

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

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

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

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

Billings remained behind his companions to say:

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

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

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

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

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

"Brace! Brace!"

"Who's there?"

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

"Where are you?"

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

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

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

"And we shall be drowned."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But what is to prevent our leaving here?"

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV

THE BARRIER

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the matter?" Fred whispered.

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

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

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

"What can we do?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We must be on the lower level."

"I reckon we are."

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

"You're right."

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

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

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

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

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

"Ay, lad, all hope."

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

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

Fred could not urge him farther. The numbness of fear was upon him, brought by this sudden surrender of the man whom he had believed would be able to extricate them from the precarious position, and now he thought only of his mother.

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

"Hello! Mate! This way!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you acquainted with all the members?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where was you last night?" he asked.

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

"I thought you'd run away."

"Why should I do anything like that?"

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

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

CHAPTER V

THE MOB

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course I do."

"Why should I know anything about it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I won't forget."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why were all hands thrown out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In less than an hour they'll have force enough to do as they please. It's time we were out of this; you go home to tell Joe, and I'll see Mr. Wright if possible."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is the superintendent?" Brace asked.

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

"Is Billings leadin' them?"

"Yes."

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

"About a dozen."

"Who are they?"

Sam repeated the names, and Brace said musingly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Open the works!" a voice shouted.

"Give us a chance at the bosses!"

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

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

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

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

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

"But why are us miners barred out?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It is cowardly to remain here."

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

"But the widow's property?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Byram was afraid to have her son leave the house at such a time; but Joe Brace made light of her fears, and she gave a reluctant consent.

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

CHAPTER VI ON DUTY

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

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

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

"And let them destroy the buildings?"

"What can you do to prevent it?"

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

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

"I realize that fact fully; but – "

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

"Boys, come here!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Then arm yourselves with these guns."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Halt! What do you want?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You tell him."

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

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

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

"Are we to stay there?"

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

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

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

"It's better than being flooded out."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Then you won't go?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How much farther must we go?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Who could have done it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello Joe! How are you?"

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

Then a lamp was pushed through, Fred and Sam crouching close against the wall to avoid observation, and its owner cried in a tone of astonishment:

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you goin' on alone?"

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

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

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

Before he could thrust his lamp through, Sam shouted:

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

CHAPTER VII

THE STRUGGLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If we could only send word to Donovan."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And leave you alone?"

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

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

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

"Do you want the cartridges?"

"Yes, and the gun."

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

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

A silent handshake and Sam was alone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How long ago?"

"When we first knew you were here."

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

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

"When did he leave?"

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

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

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

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

"Where is Joe Brace?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are you going?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VIII

THE PURSUIT

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Halt, or we'll shoot!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Have they gone back?"

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

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

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

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

"But what about Sam?"

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

"They'll kill him!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, if he knew it."

"Why not send him word?"

"How?"

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

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

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

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

"I will."

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

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

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

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

"I am ready to go."

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

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

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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