

ther—and there's Mary—and there are those poor fellows beyond call and their bairns at home.

"That settles it." He drew himself erect. "It must never be said that the bairns of Routendale were robbed of their fathers because Myles Railton thought only of himself."

Once more he plunged into the void, ran where running was possible, but this time he was a man with a message. By the spouting wall he paused only for a glance and then down the hill he went, through the waters already defying the might of the pumps. After that he climbed the farther bank, and in due time passed under the rock-hewn gap that led to the New Seam, where he began the delivery of his message.

"Away with you! The Big Barrier's coming in!"

This was all. The call was clear, the appeal convincing. One by one men wriggled, worm-like, from the holes and gashes in the tunnel sides, gazed in dumb questioning terror into the blackness whither the voice had gone, and then hurled aside their picks and took to flight.

"Away with you! The Big Barrier's coming in!"

On and on he went, every step adding to his peril, bearing him from the Land of Life into the Realm of Death. He was conscious too of fear, grisly, chilling fear, and reason rebelled against sacrifice, but not for a second did fear retard his footsteps, nor did they slacken until the clustered timbers of the dead end rose up in front of him. The messenger had accomplished his mission, every man in the mine had at least been given a chance.

One last penetrating call and now, head down, shoulders thrust forward, he begins his return. One step, a second, his foot is caught by one of the props littering the track, and down he goes. Wrenched from his fingers by the shock, his lantern rattles upon the rock.

Myles Railton lies at the end of the menaced mine, lies in the absolute darkness of the tomb.

Stunned, bleeding, dismayed, he remains his feet, remembers that moments are of mighty worth, throws out his hands like one deprived of sight, finds the wall, and gropingly fares forth upon his journey.

Every step is a matter of pained effort, and yet with every one hope deals a blow at Despair. Strange sounds assail him, shrill, guttural, metallic, the throb and gluck of the pumps, the babble of running waters. New sounds beyond his power of interpretation, and amid the sound and the darkness he pushes along.

At last he reaches the Great Dip, finds the water racing strongly and ominously deep, strains his ears for note of human voice, and is convinced that he is alone.

He is breasting the bank now, knows it by the strength of the flood. If only the wall will hold a little longer he will win. A smile, weak but exultant, flashes to his face—the thing he has attempted he has done—a hoarse cry of joy breaks from his lips and runs along the waves of noisome air.

Into the zone of the gushing barrier he carefully steers, finds the waters spouting straight across the road, hesitates for a moment, and then accepts their challenge. Ferociously they beat upon him in the darkness, hurl him against the rock, smite and pound and drown, but his courage is greater than their might.

A little way on the level and then a new peril confronts him. Banked up by the converging walls the flood is lodging; higher and yet higher it rises around him, hidden but invincible, its fingers icy cold, its voices defiant, mocking, terrifying.

Swish! Swish! The torrent swirls around him. Arms outstretched, groping for the wall, he works round another bend in the road, beholds a cluster of twinkling lights, hears the calling of his name, "Myles Railton! Myles Railton!" and sends back an answering shout.

Only a few yards further. Now he can see the forms of the men who wait for him in the hanging cage, now their hands are held out for his rescue, and now—

The Big Barrier is beaten! The imprisoned flood has won. A deafening roar volleys through the mine, a hurricane of thrashing waters, the blackness of oblivion.

III.

High overhead the sun magnificently shone and deluged the earth with golden beams; in the steeply climbing lanes behind the town the birds joyously trilled, the hills were decked with flowers, and at their feet the Solway crooned its summer song. For many days had passed since the Big Barrier fell in, and through the High Ghyll pit poured a maelstrom of desolation.

A glance at the pit's outer works showed the mark of ruin in all its hideous completeness. No longer did the winding wheels revolve in their sockets, the ropes hung limp and useless, the engines were stilled, and here

and there the headgear was ripped and splintered, a confusion of wreckage.

And yet a second glance revealed that the pit was not quite lifeless, was indeed a centre of restrained, orderly activity. Hidden somewhere in the surrounding sheds a deep-throated engine worked with methodical stroke; with every thrust it loudly shouted "Gluck," and with every pull it cried "Gluck" again. From its chambers a pipe, black and snake-like, stretched across the platform to the pit-mouth where it dipped deeply into the gaping jaws and sucked up the accumulated waters. A quarter of a mile away it tumbled them, an ebony cascade, over the hillside into the sea.

And while the mighty pumps shivered and fussed, and inch by inch, the water dropped in the shaft, the men who had been at grips with Death sat about the pit-bank in scattered groups and waited the coming of a new opportunity. There was Simeon Barnes the venomous, Richard Lang, who having worked at the dead end of the New Seam was the one for whose sake Myles had travelled farthest with his message, and a score of others whose bodies but for the heroism of the young manager would now have been fathoms deep.

Stay! A flickering movement animates every one of the groups. Stirred by a common impulse every head is turned sharply towards the gates of the colliery yard. A man in mining garb is racing up the hill, and when he comes within hailing distance he makes a trumpet of his hands and bellows his news.

"He's comin'—Myles 'is comin'—he's just crossin' t' Green."

Still squatting on the blackened debris they wait a little longer, and some of the faces broaden to a smile, and some grow strangely sad when Myles Railton enters the gates. The last time he passed those portals he lay upon a stretcher with his eyes closed and his mind a blank. Now his head is swathed in bandages, one arm he carries in a sling, the other Mary Croasdale has captured and is helping him along. Reaching the bank he smiles pleasantly upon its occupants and to Simeon Barnes passes a word.

"Bonny day, Simeon.—So they're going to save the old pit after all.—Thought I'd like to see these wonderful pumps."

"Ay, ay." This is all the response, but the tone sets Myles a-wondering, and he wonders more when a growl from the men as though they were prompting their leader, is silenced by Simeon with command more remarkable for its force than its elegance.

Revelation is granted him when he turns his face again towards home. Simeon blows a shrill blast on a whistle and from the other side of the bank a swarthy host nimbly swarms, and the whole of the pit's company form a ring around the lovers.

A cry of fear breaks from Mary's lips, and her face grows pitifully white. She knows these men and their evil repute. Myles whispers a word of comfort, and while he is yet speaking Simeon pushes to the edge of the crowd.

"Dinna be feared, Miss Mary," he says, "there's not a man here who'd hurt a hair of your bonny head. We've something to say to Myles Railton, that's all."

Now he turns to the man they had vowed to drive from their midst and speaks again, grimly, cruelly, hurtlingly.

"So we've licked you, Myles Railton. We've proved mair than you could stand, and you've sent in your papers."

"No!" Myles hotly cries, his voice all a tremble. "You're wrong there, Simeon Barnes. I'll own I've sent in my papers, given up my post as manager, but it's neither you nor your crew that has beaten me. I'm leaving the place because I'm only a lame dog now. Even when the water is all out the mine will need a strong man to put it straight, and it will be weeks before I'm fit for such a stiff job. It's not you I'm afraid of, it's myself."

"That's all right." Simeon glanced significantly at his audience. "What I've got to say is this, and what I say for myself I say for t' mates. If you don't come back till t' High Ghyll Pit I don't. We'll take orders fra no other man. We'll have Myles Railton for our manager and no one else. It's no use our tryin' to say 'Thanks' for what you did in t' pit. It can't be done."

"As for your papers. See." He waved aloft Myles' notice of resignation and the crowd broke into a tremulous cheer. "Them in authority have handed them over to us to do what we like with—and this is what we like."

He tore the paper into shreds, and as the fragments were swept away by the breeze the men of High Ghyll Pit burst into a tumultuous cheer of approval.