

The New Manager

By OSWALD WILDRIDGE

ROUND and round, with rasping hiss and hollow boom, spun the big wheels fixed in the gaunt, black head-gear, and at last, with a click and a jar, the cage came home and out into the sunlight Myles Railton passed.

Down by the pit-bank a knot of men had gathered, and from half a dozen pipes a cloud of pungent smoke swirled away over the hideous heap of underground refuse. As Myles drew near he looked towards the men, ready with a nod and smile, but the nod went without delivery, and the half-formed smile died out of his eyes, for, with sullen gesture, the others turned their heads away and declined his greeting.

This Railton recognised as another signal of war. Before he had passed beyond ear-shot, moreover, a chorus of muffled laughter mocking in its tone, defiant in intent, rattled across the road, and behind the laughter a string of half-choked words which he knew for threats. But Railton was made of stern stuff, and his teeth closed with a snap of determination and his back sharply stiffened.

"They shan't beat me," he muttered. "I'll fight as long as I can stand—and what's more, I'll win."

In all probability his confidence was really equal to his resolution, but the men on the pit-bank were equally determined and equally sure.

"We'll shift him yet," one of them, Simeon Barnes, declared; "there isn't a dozen men in t' pit on his side, an' he'll nivver be able to stand against the lot of us."

"Shift him! Of course we will," Jack Thompson assented. "I was hearing last neet that he'd been sayin' he thowt t' battle were half over, but, bless you lads, it's oonly begun. The verra idea of him coming here to wear the shoes another man should have had. We willn't stand it, an' he'll have to go."

From the days of his youth Myles had lived his workaday life in the Fleming Mine, one of the safest on Solwayside, a mine which bruised its toilers and sometimes maimed them, but very seldom killed. On the other hand the High Ghyll colliery had come to be regarded as a monster of murderous intent. Not only were its workings "full of fire," but they were deplorably treacherous, producing "falls" which no precaution apparently could prevent; whilst for its next-door neighbour the colliery had a water-logged pit which ever threatened the High Ghyll men with its pent up flood.

Nor did the character of the pit provide the only reason why Railton should have remained content with a less exalted post elsewhere. The men who hewed the coal had also acquired a reputation not a whit less evil than that of the mine itself. It was one of the mysteries of the whole of the Solway mining lands. How it had happened, or why, no one ever succeeded in explaining, but certain it is that the place seemed to form a magnet evilly charged, and that, with a few exceptions, its men were a bad lot. Add to this the fact that the miners themselves desired a word in the selection of their manager, and had resolved to secure, if it were possible, the appointment of Richard Lang, accepting him as one likely to wink at their lawlessness, and it will be seen how hopeless was the task that Railton had undertaken.

For Myles' acceptance of the post Routendale had naught but blame and regret.

"He's oalus been such a canny lad," Betty Forsyth declared, and in this she voiced the general verdict, "a canny lad, with plenty of common sense an' so ter'ble clever that he was sure of gettin' on. And noo he's spoiled it a'. Tried to travel too fast, an' for his pains he'll have a failure chalked up agen him. Bit what, it's easy to see what he's up till. He'll be wanting to turn Mary Croasdale intil a fine lady an' give her a quality house to live in."

Gossip of course made speed to carry all these pleasantries to Myles, who received them with a right merry laugh, and then let them go. A task that called for the courage of a man became his portion, however, when Mary Croasdale clasped her hands upon his arm and besought him to relinquish his enterprise.

"I'm wanting neither the house nor th' money nor the finery, Myles," she told him; "I want you. What will anything else count if the mine gets your life or the men break your heart?"

Myles kissed her and sought to reassure her with one of his most radiant smiles.

"My lassie," he said, "I'm not so keen on the money or the position as folks seem to think. I'm just a silly

sort of fellow with a liking for making the best of a bad job. Both the mine and the men require taming, and I think I can manage it. The pit has no need to be as risky as it has been, and as for the men, they've made the place a byword simply for the want of a strong hand. This is my battle, and the victory will be mine, too."

II.

Their lamps swinging by their sides, the darkness ahead and behind utterly unfathomable, the two men moved warily along the underground road, their faces turned towards home and the clear air of the open world.

On this side and that the jagged walls crowded in upon them, the timbers of the roof hung frightfully low; now and again the road became lost in heaps of rock and shale. Sometimes the progress of the two men was a painful scramble, and sometimes a crawl with bent head and hunching back. In such a place conversation was almost impossible, but under the happiest of circumstances the twain would have had nought in common, for one was Simeon Barnes and the other Myles Railton—Simeon who mistook the peaceful disposition for lack of grit, and Myles of the larger vision and the greater heart.

So, with never a word passing between them, they reached the pit's highway, and one behind the other, traversed the length of the Great Dip—down, down, deeper and deeper. Nearing the foot of the brow Myles' ear caught the soft lapping of water.

"Look out," he cried, but as the warning was uttered a sharp splash echoed through the cavern, an oath sprang viciously from Simeon's lips. Without pause the two plunged ahead, water swishing around their ankles. Suddenly the man in front halted, turned round about, raised his lamp so that Myles might perceive the derisive grin on his face, and offered the young manager first place.

"Thoo'l be feared, I'se warrant," he suggested, "so thoo'd better come till t' front an' run."

"I'd run if I wanted to, Simeon Barnes," Myles quietly replied, "and feel no shame in it. At present I'm not wanting to run—though this is a thing I don't like. The water's coming through from Jack Pit faster than it ought. Will you hurry along or let me pass?"

Soon they were rising again; the gathered water was left behind, but the tinkling of unseen rivulets declared the manner of its accumulation. Near the summit the timbering became more solid, on the right the rock gave way to a wall of brick, and here, when miner and manager raised their lamps, the drama became complete. Simeon Barnes cried aloud in fear, a single raucous cry, and fled from the spot. One glance at the bulge in the barrier, the triple streams spouting impetuously where hitherto there had been but a tiny trickle, and Myles realised that he was face to face with stupendous disaster.

And close on the heels of memory there trod the spirit of fear. Myles Railton also turned and fled. Stumbling, staggering, he blindly ran, every thought, every effort concentrated on one object—escape from the place of death. Sense dulled by terror, he lost sight of his comrades, self-preservation his only law. At first he made his flight alone, but when he entered the long stretch of the Three Deep Level the mine became vocal, warning voices screamed along its arteries, in a trice he found himself one of a mob, a panic-maddened mob that thought of nought but life.

So Myles Railton came in time to the foot of the shaft and there, golden-dowered life within his grasp, a new fact bore down upon him and he forgot his fear.

The companions of his flight threw themselves into the cage. Myles moved slowly back into the mouth of the tunnel, his face studded with clammy beads, heart and soul in desperate conflict. An age seemed to drag itself out, then a lamp split the darkness at the bend, another man raced towards him. Myles flung out his hand and gripped him.

"What of the New Seam men," he demanded; "do they know?"

The other wrenched himself free and vanished in the gloom. Another came and another, but the New Seam lay a full mile beyond the bursting barrier, and of its toilers not one had anything to tell.

"Shall I," Myles muttered, "shall I—there's my mo-