

Northern Messenger

VOLUME XXXIX. No. 43

MONTREAL, OCTOBER 21, 1904.

40 Cts. Post-Paid

Out of the Heart of the Earth

(C. J. Hamilton, in the 'People's Own Paper.')

'Oh, William, do let me ride Dobbin! I want to so much. You know I'm going to work at the pit next week—father says I must. I shan't have a chance of riding Dobbin again.'

'No, no, Grant, my lad. You'd just let old Dobbin fall, and break his knees, and there'd be a nice look-out for me. What should I say to master then? He's wonderful fond of that horse, he is!'

'I'm fond of him, too,' said Grant, as he stood by the big brown horse, stroking the rough mane that hung over his patient eyes. 'And you'll never, never, let me even get on his back!'

'Well, never's a long word. Mayhap, if 'twas to save your life I might; not unless. Now, run away with you, 'tis gotten dark, and I've my cows to milk afore supper.'

The two speakers were William Berryman, Farmer Candy's head man, and Grant Milward, a lad of fifteen, who lived in one of the thatched cottages that stood in a row just above the village of Chilcompton. Grant was a motherless boy. His father, who was a coal miner, had married a second time, and there was a family of seven little ones bring up on eighteen shillings a week.

Grant's stepmother was a little woman with a very sharp tongue. On Saturdays and on washing days she scolded so much that Grant was glad to run away in the evenings, and take refuge at the farm with his friend William Berryman.

William was a tall, long-backed man, who talked very slowly and deliberately. He had the kindest heart in the world, and he was very good to poor, lonely Grant, and let him help to feed the pigs and litter down the horses, often giving him a rosy-cheeked apple or a silver sixpence for his trouble. And this was how the lad grew to love Dobbin, and to long to ride him. But he knew that minding pigs and horses was not the work that his father meant for him.

'Grant'll have to work at the pits,' said John Milward; and his little wife nodded her head, and said, 'Yes, yes; the sooner the better. He ought to have been earnin' his crust long ago, like the other boys down street.'

'He's a weakly chap,' said John. 'His mother wasn't to say a strong woman, and he takes after her.'

'He's strong enough,' was the answer.

It was quite true that all the other boys in the village began to work at eleven or twelve. They were better paid at the pits than for farm labor, and they got to like it better.

Grant was sound asleep the first morning that his father called him to get up and go to work with him. It was between one and two, and very, very dark. The feeble little twinkle that came from the candles in their rooms only made it seem darker. As they passed the farm Grant glanced at Dobbin's stable. All was silent there, everything—birds and flowers—seemed asleep. How well he knew the way to the coal pit!—up a hill with heaps of rubble and coal dust on each side, and the fiery red eyes of the engines.



IT WAS LIKE BEING IN A NEW WORLD.

A gang of men was waiting to take the next turn.

John Milward and Grant joined them, and in a few minutes they were all clinging like bees to the great thick rope that swung to and fro as the living burden was carried down below into the heart of the earth. What a wonderful black underground world they found there!—full of men, all as busy as possible, hacking coal with pickaxes, filling trucks, which had to be pushed away and emptied again to fill the big black buckets that were drawn up every quarter of an hour.

Grant's work was to help to fill the trucks. He found it pretty easy at first, but by the time he left off, at one o'clock, his arms were stiff, and his head reeled. How strange to find bright daylight above-ground! But he must go to bed, so as to be ready to start again next morning when the stars were shining. After he had been two years at the pits he got quite expert at filling coal-trucks, and was able to earn nine shillings a week.

Just in the coldest part of January Grant

was working with a gang of men in a far corner of the pit, when suddenly there was a hollow thud, like a clap of thunder.

'What's that?' asked Grant of his father, who was working next him.

'Keep still, lad,' answered John, but his face grew white as he spoke. 'I guess what 'tis; we are shut in. The coal up above's fallen in; the passage is blocked!'

'And we can't get out!'

'That's about it.' The men clustered round the opening. There, sure enough, was an enormous block of coal, which had fallen right across the entrance. They looked at one another.

'Whatever are we to do?' went up with one great cry.

'Nothing! Just wait till the others come.'

'But it may be days before they get to us.'

'We can't help that. Let's see what we have to keep us alive.'

About two ounces of tobacco, a large chunk of bread, a small piece of cheese, three rosy apples, and a stick of chocolate from Grant's

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