

Down in a Coal Mine

BY THE EDITOR

NANAIMO is the Newcastle of British Columbia. Underneath the streets, stores and churches there is another town, dark and damp, but busy with industry, for here are large deposits of coal which have been mined for many years, and still prove a great source of wealth to the Province. It is essentially a mining town, as most of the inhabitants obtain their living by working in the mines far below the surface, or in loading the ships that lie in the harbor ready to carry the coal to San Francisco and other points.

Having the opportunity of spending a few days here, I decided to go down into one of the largest coal mines, and see for myself how coal is obtained. It was a most interesting experience which I did not have missed on any account, but which I would not care very much to repeat.

The shaft is 630 feet in depth, and we went down in a

a low winding passage way at the rate of about eight to ten miles an hour, banging, clattering, twisting, turning, until we come to the end of the railway, or, at least, as far as the electric motors run. The coal is brought to this point by the mules, when trains of from fifty to eighty cars are made up and sent out to the shaft.

The rest of our journey has to be made on foot, as well as the entire return trip, involving a walk, altogether, of from two to three miles. To be candid, I have often enjoyed a walk better. The path was rough and muddy, and the roof above us varied in height from five to eight feet, more frequently being five than eight. Those of us who were tall had to walk in a bent-over position most of the time. Our heads frequently ground against the rock above us, and we were in danger of losing all the hair upon our crowns. Our spines became so bent that it took some time to straighten them out when the end of the journey was reached.

Talk about the "Fat Man's Misery" of the Mammoth Cave, that was nothing compared to the concentrated and prolonged wretchedness of this coal mine trip. Here is a "Fat Man's Misery" a mile and a half long.

The lot of the coal miner is not a very happy one. Away down in the darkness, a mile and a half from the daylight, he picks away all day long earning his daily bread by the sweat of his brow. Each man has a separate place or stall in which to work, and illumination is provided by a lamp which is fastened to his cap. The veins of coal vary from one to eight feet in diameter, and the usual method of getting it out is for its foundation to be picked away, when a hole is drilled in the coal, a charge of powder inserted and fired. An explosion follows, and great blocks of coal are loosened. These are broken up and piled into the little box cars, the miner placing a check with his number in each car filled by himself. When the coal is weighed at the mouth of the

pit, every man is credited with what he has mined, and paid accordingly. Most of the workmen get from three to five dollars per day, and certainly they earn it.

A few years ago the work of loosening the coal from its solid bed was done entirely by hand, but recently coal-cutting machines have been introduced, which have reduced the cost of mining considerably, and, of course, increased the production.

One cannot make a visit of this kind without being impressed with the wisdom and benevolence of God, who has stored up for man's use such immense and seemingly inexhaustible supplies of fuel. Some people think that the world is coming to an end pretty soon, but there is no indication of it down here. The strong probability is that the Lord is going to keep this old world of ours swinging through space for a very long time, as He has provided in the bowels of the earth fuel supply enough for thousands and thousands of years. This wonderful wealth of coal has certainly not been prepared for nothing.

A coal mining town is different from most other mining communities. In silver, gold, copper and nickel mining there is an element of uncertainty, as the veins and ore pockets of metal that promise much in a certain place may suddenly disappear, and the prospectors have to move on. Consequently their homes are of a transient character. They are



STABLE IN A COAL MINE, THREE HUNDRED FEET UNDER GROUND

large iron cage, very similar to an ordinary elevator. Before starting, the manager very kindly furnished us with rubber coats, cloth caps, etc., for the protection of our clothing, as a coal mine is not the cleanest place in the world.

The man in charge of the machinery was very considerate, and let the cage descend quite gently. When about half way down a strange sensation is experienced. The cage seems to be going up instead of down. In a moment or two, however, we touch the bottom of the shaft, and find ourselves in the mine. The first place visited was the stables, where about forty powerful mules are kept for the purpose of hauling coal in the mine. They are well fed and comfortably housed, but their lot cannot be a very happy one, as they have to live perpetually in the gloom of their underground quarters. Once in a while some of them are taken up for a short holiday above ground. At first they do not know what to make of it, as for a time they cannot see. After a while they get the use of their eyes, and then give way to feelings of indescribable delight by running, jumping and rolling upon the grass. A vacation in a pasture field must mean a great deal to a coal mine mule.

The guide requests two of the gentlemen of our party to open a door leading from the stables. We were astonished to find that the door resisted our efforts although there were no fastenings. The pressure of the air is so great that a strong man has to exert all his strength to open the doors. The coal is mined about two miles from the mouth of the shaft, and is brought in by trains of small cars drawn by electric motors. As the cars go back empty we have the privilege of riding out. Ensnoring ourselves in the little black vehicles, seated upon lumps of coal, away we go through



THE DAY'S WORK DONE