

CHRISTMAS AT BLACK EAGLE COLLIERY.

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CHAPTER I.

During all October and half of November no work was done in the Black Eagle mine, except by the pumps draining the sump. The "coal pool"—a combination of anthracite mine owners formed to check overproduction and keep up the price of coal—had arbitrarily ordered a "shut down." Such stoppage of labor at one or more of the numerous collieries in the anthracite fields was common, but the length of time prescribed for it in this case was unusual and not without a purpose. A general reduction of miners' wages was in contemplation, and the Black Eagle had been selected as the point at which the first blow should be struck for its inauguration. In their best times the 800 men employed there, with their families, lived from "hand to mouth," and it was only reasonable to expect that the exhaustion of their scanty resources by a prolonged "shut down" would leave them so close to starvation that they would be glad to get work at any rate. Then the new scale, thus established at one point, would be made general as rapidly as circumstances would permit.

The Black Eagle miners, however, displayed an unexpected obstinacy in resistance to the pretty scheme. They actually refused to go to work under the new scale, and a "strike" was declared. That signified nothing to the "coal pool," which was helped by it in keeping down production, but was a terrible misfortune for the 300 and their wretched families. Cold and hunger were in all their comfortless homes; bitterness and almost despair in their hearts. Nevertheless in dogged endurance they struggled through the latter half of November and three weeks of December, obtaining from workers in other mines sufficient aid to barely maintain life.

Christmas eve came, and still there was upon the surface no indication of a change in the situation, but a present impression began to be generally felt that a crisis was rapidly approaching.

The small and repellently ugly frame houses of the miners were scattered in an irregular double row along the rugged road on the bleak hillside above the colliery. In one of them this Christmas eve, in the darkness, were to be heard two voices—those of a woman and of a child.

"Please, gran'ma, do light tandle," pleaded the little one beseechingly. "Please do. It so dark. Ally hate dark."

"Try and get used to the dark, dear. Ye'll have to get used to everything ye hate most when ye're older," replied the woman.

"Ally wants see pitty picture; please light tandle, gran'ma."

"Oh! darlin', it's the last one we've got, and suppose you'd be took sick in the night, what would we do then for a light?"

"Ally won't be sick. Please light tandle."

"Well, well, dear; it's a little thing to deny a child, the Lord knows. Give it here off the table."

The woman groped about on the floor for a twig from a bunch laid by the stove to dry for kindling, poked it among the few coals still glowing in the stove, and when it blazed lighted with it the candle handed to her by the child. By the feeble light it could be seen that she was sitting upon a low seat—a bit of board laid across the top of an empty powder keg—in front of the stove. She was gaunt and pale, her hair streaked with gray, and her thin calico dress was patched on the breast and arms. The child—a little girl with curly golden hair—knelt beside her knees, and thrusting a fragment of paper in her hands said eagerly:

"See, gran'ma; pitty picture; tell Ally 'bout it."

"It's Santa Claus."

"Who Santy Taus, gran'ma?"

"He's a fine old gentleman who brings Christmas gifts to them he has a likin for; mostly to children."

"Oh! Will he bring Ally anyfin?"

"Indeed he won't. I'll go bail for that. Far enough he'll keep himself from the Black Eagle colliery."

"I'd make no differ if he had. He isn't makin acquaintances of our sort. Make up your mind to that."

"Will he never bring Ally anything?"

"Maybe, when you're old and tired out, and heart sore, and learn to pray for it, he may bring ye—a coffin."

"I hate Santy Taus."

"Ye needn't child. He's like all the rest. It's the way of the world. The

richer and happier folks are, the better he likes them, and he's never tired but for them that don't need his help. But he scorns the likes of us."

The tears gathered in little Alice's eyes as she sadly regarded the picture of cruel, unympathetic Santa Claus. She but vaguely comprehended the bitterness of the old woman's feeling, yet the spirit of it touched her and made life seem drearier than ever before.

"Where did you get the picture?"

"Found it in road." And she threw it away. "Ally tired, gran'ma. Want go by by."

"Go along, dear, and may the saints give you sweet sleep and fine dreams. Sure they're the best things ye'll ever know."

The child disappeared in a dark doorway to the right after kissing her grandmother good night. The woman sat still, with her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands and her eyes glowering at the little grate, where the fire had ceased to show.

"The kindest thing he could bring to her this night would be the coffin. God forgive me for saying it," she muttered through her teeth.

The outer door was suddenly thrown open, and a man with a heavy burden in a sack on his shoulder staggered in. He dropped his load beside the stove with a "chuck" that shook the frail tenement, and blowing in his hollowed hands to warm them with his breath exclaimed:

"Cripes! But it's mortal cold. The fingers is nearly froze off of me crabbin' under the snow."

"Put ye feet up on the stove. They must be soakin'," suggested the woman, rising and hastening to make up the fire with coal she took from the sack.

"That they are. I might as well be wearin' fishin' nets on my feet as them shoes. But what's the good of growlin'! Sure they're no worse than your own, my poor Eily."

"Ah! It's the bitter, black Christmas this is for us."

"I met Fogarty," remarked the man after a little pause.

"The watchman?"

"Yes."

"I'd 'a' thought you'd show more marks of it, and you wake as you are wid the hunger. Are you hurted?"

"We didn't fight."

"No?"

"I'll tell ye how it was. He came on me unbeknownst, while I had my head down pickin' among the culm, an' the first thing I knew he was standin' beside me."

"Andy Corrigan," says he, "don't you know it's agin' orders for the strikers to be let pick coal from the culm pile?"

"Bad luck to them that gev the orders," interjected the woman fervently. "Amen! 'But," says I, "it's froze to death the childer will be, to say nothin' of ourselves if we don't be let."

"'Wid that," says he, "I've nothin' to do. Orders is orders, and them's orders."

The woman, with a quick clutch at her back hair, let it fall in a loose, straggling mass on her bony shoulders, and raising her hands above her head in an attitude of imprecation exclaimed:

"May the curse of the needy and the hopeless fall upon—"

"Howld on, woman! Howld on wid your cursin'! Bide a bit till you get the rights of your message to the divil. It's mighty free with your curses you are."

"Sure it's all we have left to give."

"Maybe not. Hear me out. 'Now,' says he, 'I'm on my rounds, and I won't be back this way for two hours, and I don't want to find you here when I come again.'

"'God knows I hope you won't, for I'm nigh froze already, and the sack is half full."

"'Wid snow, I suppose,' says he, wid a grin, and off he went."

"'Sure,' exclaimed the woman, with a grim smile, 'it was the same as tellin' ye to take what ye needed!'"

"That's how I understood it, and that's what I did."

"The blessin' of the saints be on Fogarty. Sure it's a good heart he's got, even if he is a watchman."

"Gran'ma! It's so told!" called a little whimpering voice from the next room. Andy Corrigan quickly took off his jacket, and his wife carried it in to the child, whom she could be heard soothing while wrapping the garment about her.

"There, dear; he still now and soon ye'll be warm as toast. Try and go to sleep and dream about the angels. This is Christmas eve, and they'll be all around ye tonight."

"Is Hugh in yet?" asked Andy when Eily returned to his side.

"He's not been home since mornin'."

"Ah, the poor boy! It's to have us his share of the meat he stays out. It's nearly all gone, isn't it?"

"Yes, but there's enough to last over Christmas."

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Corrigan was right. Hugh knew by experience—as thousands of coal miners have been compelled to learn—that a scanty breakfast of cornmeal mush daily would keep him alive, and that was all he proposed to take from the family's meager supply until the hard times should be over.

But something else kept him abroad just now. Strange, revolutionary ideas floating about filled him with anxiety.

"The rights of labor have too long been ignored. If justice is not peacefully accorded by capital, it must be

compelled by force. The rich man smiles at seeing the wolf of starvation tearing his poor brother's throat, but the knife at his own will quickly teach him he, too, is but human. A man may possess a million dollars, but can have only one life. You cannot coerce the rich by mere interruption of their accumulation of wealth; to bring them to reason it is necessary to make them fear death."

Such were the things Hugh heard being said. And their author was one of the last men in the community from whom they might have been expected—old Emil Wagner—a little weazen faced, blue eyed German miner, who had been on the Black Eagle rolls for at least a dozen years past.

The English speaking miners generally did not take kindly to his ideas, but they were accepted as gospel by the Hungarians and Slavs, whose language he spoke and to whom he had endeared himself by many acts of kindness.

The strikers' executive committee, composed of David Evans, Patsey Garrity and Dan Cornell—a Welshman, an Irishman and an Englishman, as their names indicated—were not a little anxious about what "the foreigners" might do and the possible consequences involved. In the hope of curbing Wagner's pernicious influence they summoned him before a general meeting of the men on Christmas eve. The scene of the meeting was an impressive one. Having no room large enough to hold them, nearly all the 300 miners assembled in an open space in the woods, where they had stationed sentries to keep away spies. Their only light was that of the moon, fitfully bright, which accentuated the paleness of their rugged, careworn faces. Emil Wagner, being called upon to explain himself, said to them:

"Your contest must fail if not carried on upon a plane where you and your antagonists are equal, which is certainly not that of resources. The destitution and misery in your wretched homes should have convinced you of that by this time. Where, then, are the starving miner and the arrogant mine owner equal? Before the king of terrors—Death. Let your masters know that if you must starve you will not die alone; that those dear to you shall not be unavenged. Make yourselves feared, if you would be respected. Kill, if you yourselves wish to live."

"Who would you want killed?" gasped the English committee man, quite aghast.

"I want nobody killed, but it seems to me the necessities of the situation include using Superintendent Brattle as a warning."

"Why? What has he ever done to you?" demanded Garrity.

"To me! Nothing whatever. And even if he had done me personally every possible injury, not on my own account would I wish his life taken. But he is the representative of the power antagonizing us, and his fate would warn our masters that their slaves are in deadly earnest."

"What's the matter," shouted a striker, "with touching capital where it is tenderest—in its pocket? Burn the breaker! Flood the mine!"

"And destroy the field of your employment for months to come," responded Wagner promptly; "hurting yourselves worst, since the county would have to pay all the damages."

The discussion was long and grew hot. Finally Chairman David Evans "sat down" on Wagner, as he had all along intended to do.

"It ill becomes a man, old and intelligent as you are, Mr. Wagner," said he, "to talk in that murderous way, and we want to hear no more of it."

That was the general sentiment of the English speaking strikers, but when Evans' words were translated to the brutal and obstinate Slavs, they scowled and walked away in grim silence.

Hugh Corrigan, though too young to take any prominent part, felt a vivid interest in the proceedings and had a lively appreciation of the perilous quality in the forces Emil Wagner had set in motion. He knew that Mr. Brattle's danger was very real and not to be charmed away by the Welshman's conservative rebuke. And if Wagner only looked upon Mr. Brattle as a superintendent it was altogether as a man Hugh thought of him and conceived it his duty to warn him. On his own account solely? Well, hardly.

But Mr. Brattle had a daughter—Mary—who, in the young man's quite unbiased and critical estimation, was beyond all question the sweetest and prettiest girl in the world. That decided opinion had been arrived at by him in the short space of two hours upon a memorable afternoon six months ago, when he acted as guide for Miss Mary Brattle and three or four other visitors through the intricate depths of the Black Eagle mine.

Clearly it was an imperative necessity that he should, for her sweet sake, warn her father against the murderous Slavs. He did not shut his eyes to the fact that a striker who made himself in anywise prominent, even by the doing of a conspicuously good deed, was pretty certain to be a marked man and made to suffer for it when the strike was ended.

The road he took was a rough and dangerous path over the mountain, but enabled him to reach the superintendent's house, which lay about half a mile beyond the breaker, with but little risk of being seen by any one who might take exception to his mission.

There were no lights in Mr. Brattle's windows when Hugh reached there, for the hour was late, but his first timid tap with the brass knocker on the door brought as an immediate response the demand in a feminine voice from a window opened behind closed blinds:

"What is wanted?"

He recognized the sweet voice, and his own trembled a little as he replied, "Is Mr. Brattle at home?"

"No; Mr. Brattle is not at home," and the speaker slightly opening the slats to peep out exclaimed, "Oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Corrigan?"

Delighted astonishment at that recognition so overwhelmed the young man that he could not exactly take in the

sense of what she told him, and he stammered, "I would like to see him."

"He went out with—with a friend half an hour ago or more. Is it anything particular?"

"Oh, Miss Brattle, I can't tell you how particular it is. I have come to warn him not to go among the men, for his life is in danger."

"I did not think I would ever hear my father threatened by a man of the Black Eagle colliery."

"For God's sake, don't misunderstand me. Can't you know the difference between a threat and a warning. There are men who would knock my head off for coming here tonight to tell him this. Trouble makers are telling about that he is going to bring in more Slavs, with Pinkerton men to protect them, and that makes the men hot. And they have some bad advisers among them."

"I'm sure he would have no hand in such a wicked thing. He would resign sooner."

Before Hugh could reply they were startled by the dull sound of an explosion in the direction of the colliery.

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Brattle, when he left home, was accompanied by a stout but active gentleman, a little past the prime of life, whom he addressed as Mr. Andrews. They strolled as far as the company's breaker without seeing anybody, and stood chatting in its shadow for a few minutes. Then they started up the road toward the miners' houses. Thick cloud patches drifting across the sky made the moon's bright light fitful. It was in a moment when her radiance made everything almost as clear as day that they left the shadow, and hardly had they taken a dozen steps in the open road when they heard in the air above them a burst of Slavonic execration, coupled with Mr. Brattle's name. On a high trestlework supporting a car track were three Slavs, looking like giants up there in the moonlight, who instantly began, with unpleasant expertise of aim, hurling lumps of coal and heavy iron missiles at them.

"Run for your life, Mr. Andrews," exclaimed the superintendent, leaping back into the breaker's shadow; "you can't reason with those animals. Hide before they climb down, or we will be lost."

"With all my heart. Jump out here and go with me. We'll not be likely to meet any one and can keep ahead of the crowd that will be coming up presently." He led them straight to his father's house, and when they had entered said, as he lighted the candle: "Here you will be safe until near day light, when you can try for home. Everybody will be asleep then, and I will guide you by a road few travel at any time."

Mr. Andrews looked about him with a shudder, and sinking upon a stool put his frozen feet on the stove hearth to warm.

"Something ugly has happened in the incline," remarked Hugh, "but nobody seems to know rightly what it is."

"I know all about it," replied Mr. Brattle, and related their adventure with the Slavs, asking in conclusion how far their feeling was shared by the other men.

"Not at all, sir," answered the young man warmly. "Barring the cattle imported by the company the time of the strike, and perhaps one old crank, there's none would harm a hair of your head, and it will go hard with the Slavs who did that devil's job tonight when the men find them out."

"You feel sure of what you say?" demanded Mr. Andrews sharply.

"As that I am alive."

"Then I wish you would go at once to the leaders of the strike—I take it for granted the men have leaders—and ask them to come here at daylight for a conference. This strike can and must be ended immediately. I know I'm giving you trouble, but will make it worth your while."

"Don't speak of that, sir. I'd do anything honest to end the strike."

"Go ahead, then, and we will await here your return."

Hugh went immediately. When he was gone the superintendent said:

"Look about you, Mr. Andrews, and see the home of an honest, sober, industrious and skillful miner—as Andrew Corrigan is. Even the necessities of our life are scant. Mere comforts here would be luxuries. There may be a little corn meal in the cupboard, but no other food I would wager. Open that dinner can hanging on the wall, and ten to one you will find a block of wood in it. Do you know why? That its lightness may not betray its emptiness when the man carries it down into the mine with him as a public pretense that he can afford a midday meal. See that patched gown and trousers hung on the clotheshorse to dry for daily use tomorrow. I'm glad you have a chance to see this for yourself. I have long wanted to get one director with a heart in him to come here and learn the situation as it really exists."

"But," stammered Mr. Andrews, "this is during a rather prolonged strike."

"They were only a little better off when they had work; more cornmeal and perhaps now and then a bit of salt pork when there were not too many 'shut downs,' but not much else. Nothing has gone to the pawnbrokers."

"Quick, now!" urged the superintendent. "We must get away from here before the crowd comes."

They ran a little way across the flat, and then up the hillside road until coming voices alarmed them, when they flung themselves down in the shadow of a clump of bushes behind a little pile of mine timbers by the road. Gangs of excited miners rushed by until it seemed as if all the men in the community must have gone down to the breaker. Still the fugitives did not venture to move. To return to Mr. Brattle's house they would have had to pass through the crowd of strikers, which in the light of their recent experience hardly seemed safe, or go by the mountain path, which the superintendent did not know.

"If we stay here much longer I shall be frozen stiff," remarked Mr. Andrews in a whispered growl. "If we'd had just a little sense we would have staid in the house and fixed up the children's Christmas tree."

"Well, this moonlight ramble was not on my programme, you know."

"And I was seventy sorts of a fool for insisting on it. I know that now. I should have remembered what I have often thought—that you, here on the ground, understood the situation much better than we could in New York."

"I hope to convince you of that. You shall see for yourself."

"If I live. Where the mischief do you suppose they got the nitroglycerin?"

"No telling. Stole it somewhere, I suppose."

Neither of the fugitives noticed a man coming up from the breaker until he arrived within sound of their speech, halted and uttered a sharp "Hello there!" of challenge. It was Hugh on his way home after learning the little concerning the explosion that could be guessed at that night—the Slavs having had the sense to keep accurate knowledge to themselves. His hasty imagination, when he heard the voices, was that the speakers were Slavs in ambush for the man he meant to save, and it was a great relief to his mind when Mr. Brattle replied, uttering his name in a tone of unmistakably gratified recognition:

"A friend and myself have escaped from some fellows who wanted to kill us. Will you help us to get away from here?"

"With all my heart. Jump out here and go with me. We'll not be likely to meet any one and can keep ahead of the crowd that will be coming up presently."

"Here you will be safe until near day light, when you can try for home. Everybody will be asleep then, and I will guide you by a road few travel at any time."

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CHAPTER IV.

Hearing some movement in the next room, the men noiselessly stepped into the shadow of the clotheshorse. A pretty little mite of a barefoot girl, with light golden curls framing her pale, thin face, appeared in the door, blinking at the candle as if wondering at its being alight. A man's coarse cardigan jacket dangled around her ragged little nightdress, and she carried in one hand a small stocking.

"Don't tarry what gran'ma says," she audibly soliloquized. "Santy Taus might tum. Ally dream Santy Taus bin' gran'ma 'n gran'pa shoes, 'n dolly for Ally, 'n watch 't Untle Hugh—lots to eat."

While she talked she climbed up on a

stool and put her stocking on the mantel, with a chunk of coal on its toe and the top dangling down—an excellent symbol, Mr. Brattle thought, of the miner's prospects in life.

"Do, please, good Mr. Santy Taus, bring us sunfin to eat anyway," she said pleadingly, clambered down and toddled off to bed. Presently they heard her whimper, "Oh, 't's so cold!" then all was still.



"DO, PLEASE, GOOD MR. SANTY TAUS, BRING US SUNFIN TO EAT ANYWAY."

Mr. Andrews came from behind the screen with tears in his eyes and in his hand a wad of bank notes, which he silently poked into the little stocking and then, sitting down again, sank into a reverie. Mr. Brattle did not disturb him. Silence reigned, broken only by the mournful howls of the wind, which rose after midnight. At length the two men whispered anxiously about Hugh's protracted absence. Something they feared must have happened to him. He came with the dawn, looking so worn and haggard that his appearance startled them. They didn't know it, but he had gone through over twenty hours of almost continuous exertion without a morsel of food, and that as the culmination of weeks of starvation. He reported:

"One of the men, the most important, had gone to Laurel Run, and I went over after him."

"Fourteen miles, there and back, over an exceptionally abominable mountain road," Mr. Brattle explained, sotto voce to his companion.

"He will be here," continued Hugh. "before 8 o'clock. I thought Miss Brattle might be anxious, so I stopped on the way back to tell her you were safe, sir."

"Thank you, Hugh. That was a good, kind thing to do, and not a little one, for it took you a good half mile out of your way, and you must have been very tired."

"Oh, that's nothing, sir. I'm glad I went."

"Did you see Mary herself?"

"The minute after I knocked. She was so anxious she had not gone to bed, but when I left her mind was easy. She told me to wish you a merry Christmas, sir."

"My God!" exploded Mr. Andrews. "The idea of a merry Christmas here!"

"It depends on you," responded Mr. Brattle to him in a low tone.

Presently Mr. Corrigan, tumbled, testy and surprised, emerged from his bedroom. All the hospitality at his command he extended to his visitors—he put more coal in the stove. Then he took down the woman's gown from the clotheshorse and handed it into the bedroom that Mrs. Corrigan might dress herself. When she came out she brought the coarse gray blanket from her bed and laid it over the sleeping child in place of the jacket, which Mr. Corrigan then put on.

Mary Brattle came over on horseback at a very early hour, bringing with her a big basket full of bacon, bread and coffee.

"I knew you had guests this morning," she said to Mrs. Corrigan, "whom it is my duty to take care of, so I hope you will not be offended at my helping you to entertain them." Her tone was so frank and friendly that it won the matron's good will at once, and no rebellious pride prejudiced her against the prospect of a good breakfast. In a few minutes the bacon was sizzling in a pan and for the first time in many months the aroma of coffee amazed the atmosphere of the miner's home. Alice awoke and sniffed it. With a scramble and plunge she was out of bed and in the middle of the family room, staring with wonder dilated eyes at the preparations for breakfast and quite oblivious of the presence of strangers. Throwing up her hands, with a shrill scream of ecstatic joy, she cried:

"Oh, gran'ma, Santy Taus did tum!"

The strikers' committee appeared on