CHAPTER III. THE DOCHART PIT

HARRY FORD was a fine, strapping fellow of five and twenty. His grave looks, his habitually passive expression, had from childhood been noticed among his comrades in the mine. His regular features, his deep blue eyes, his curly hair, rather chestnut than fair, the natural grace of his person, altogether made him a fine specimen of a lowlander. Accustomed from his earliest days to the work of the mine, he was strong and hardy, as well as brave and good. Guided by his father, and impelled by his own inclinations, he had early begun his education, and at an age when most lads are little more than apprentices, he had managed to make himself of some importance, a leader, in fact, among his fellows, and few are very ignorant in a country which does all it can to remove ignorance. Though, during the first years of his youth, the pick was never out of Harry's hand, nevertheless the young miner was not long in acquiring sufficient knowledge to raise him into the upper class of the miners, and he would certainly have succeeded his father as overman of the Dochart pit, if the colliery had not been abandoned.

James Starr was still a good walker, yet he could not easily have kept up with his guide, if the latter had not slackened his pace. The young man, carrying the engineer's bag, followed the left bank of the river for about a mile. Leaving its winding course, they took a road under tall, dripping trees. Wide fields lay on either side, around isolated farms. In one field a herd of hornless cows were quietly grazing; in

another sheep with silky wool, like those in a child's toy sheep fold.

The Yarrow shaft was situated four miles from Callander. Whilst walking, James Starr could not but be struck with the change in the country. He had not seen it since the day when the last ton of Aberfoyle coal had been emptied into railway trucks to be sent to Glasgow. Agricultural life had now taken the place of the more stirring, active, industrial life. The contrast was all the greater because, during winter, field work is at a standstill. But formerly, at whatever season, the mining population, above and below ground, filled the scene with animation. Great wagons of coal used to be passing night and day. The rails, with their rotten sleepers, now disused, were then constantly ground by the weight of wagons. Now stony roads took the place of the old mining tramways. James Starr felt as if he was traversing a desert.

The engineer gazed about him with a saddened eye. He stopped now and then to take breath. He listened. The air was no longer filled with distant whistlings and the panting of engines. None of those black vapors which the manufacturer loves to see, hung in the horizon, mingling with the clouds. No tall cylindrical or prismatic chimney vomited out smoke, after being fed from the mine itself; no blast-pipe was puffing out its white vapor. The ground, formerly black with coal dust, had a bright look, to which James Starr's eyes were not accustomed.

When the engineer stood still, Harry Ford stopped also. The young miner

waited in silence. He felt what was passing in his companion's mind, and he shared his feelings; he, a child of the mine, whose whole life had been passed in its depths.

"Yes, Harry, it is all changed," said Starr. "But at the rate we worked, of course the treasures of coal would have been exhausted some day. Do you regret that time?"

"I do regret it, Mr. Starr," answered Harry. "The work was hard, but it was interesting, as are all struggles."

"No doubt, my lad. A continuous struggle against the dangers of landslips, fires, inundations, explosions of firedamp, like claps of thunder. One had to guard against all those perils! You say well! It was a struggle, and consequently an exciting life."

"The miners of Alva have been more favored than the miners of Aberfoyle, Mr. Starr!"

"Ay, Harry, so they have," replied the engineer.

"Indeed," cried the young man, "it's a pity that all the globe was not made of coal; then there would have been enough to last millions of years!"

"No doubt there would, Harry; it must be acknowledged, however, that

nature has shown more forethought by forming our sphere principally of sandstone, limestone, and granite, which fire cannot consume."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Starr, that mankind would have ended by burning their own globe?"

"Yes! The whole of it, my lad," answered the engineer. "The earth would have passed to the last bit into the furnaces of engines, machines, steamers, gas factories; certainly, that would have been the end of our world one fine day!"

"There is no fear of that now, Mr. Starr. But yet, the mines will be exhausted, no doubt, and more rapidly than the statistics make out!"

"That will happen, Harry; and in my opinion England is very wrong in exchanging her fuel for the gold of other nations! I know well," added the engineer, "that neither hydraulics nor electricity has yet shown all they can do, and that some day these two forces will be more completely utilized. But no matter! Coal is of a very practical use, and lends itself easily to the various wants of industry. Unfortunately man cannot produce it at will. Though our external forests grow incessantly under the influence of heat and water, our subterranean forests will not be reproduced, and if they were, the globe would never be in the state necessary to make them into coal."

James Starr and his guide, whilst talking, had continued their walk at

a rapid pace. An hour after leaving Callander they reached the Dochart pit.

The most indifferent person would have been touched at the appearance this deserted spot presented. It was like the skeleton of something that had formerly lived. A few wretched trees bordered a plain where the ground was hidden under the black dust of the mineral fuel, but no cinders nor even fragments of coal were to be seen. All had been carried away and consumed long ago.

They walked into the shed which covered the opening of the Yarrow shaft, whence ladders still gave access to the lower galleries of the pit. The engineer bent over the opening. Formerly from this place could be heard the powerful whistle of the air inhaled by the ventilators. It was now a silent abyss. It was like being at the mouth of some extinct volcano.

When the mine was being worked, ingenious machines were used in certain shafts of the Aberfoyle colliery, which in this respect was very well off; frames furnished with automatic lifts, working in wooden slides, oscillating ladders, called "man-engines," which, by a simple movement, permitted the miners to descend without danger.

But all these appliances had been carried away, after the cessation of the works. In the Yarrow shaft there remained only a long succession of ladders, separated at every fifty feet by narrow landings. Thirty of these ladders placed thus end to end led the visitor down into the

lower gallery, a depth of fifteen hundred feet. This was the only way of communication which existed between the bottom of the Dochart pit and the open air. As to air, that came in by the Yarrow shaft, from whence galleries communicated with another shaft whose orifice opened at a higher level; the warm air naturally escaped by this species of inverted siphon.

"I will follow you, my lad," said the engineer, signing to the young man to precede him.

"As you please, Mr. Starr."

"Have you your lamp?"

"Yes, and I only wish it was still the safety lamp, which we formerly had to use!"

"Sure enough," returned James Starr, "there is no fear of fire-damp explosions now!"

Harry was provided with a simple oil lamp, the wick of which he lighted. In the mine, now empty of coal, escapes of light carburetted hydrogen could not occur. As no explosion need be feared, there was no necessity for interposing between the flame and the surrounding air that metallic screen which prevents the gas from catching fire. The Davy lamp was of

no use here. But if the danger did not exist, it was because the cause of it had disappeared, and with this cause, the combustible in which formerly consisted the riches of the Dochart pit.

Harry descended the first steps of the upper ladder. Starr followed. They soon found themselves in a profound obscurity, which was only relieved by the glimmer of the lamp. The young man held it above his head, the better to light his companion. A dozen ladders were descended by the engineer and his guide, with the measured step habitual to the miner. They were all still in good condition.

James Starr examined, as well as the insufficient light would permit, the sides of the dark shaft, which were covered by a partly rotten lining of wood.

Arrived at the fifteenth landing, that is to say, half way down, they halted for a few minutes.

"Decidedly, I have not your legs, my lad," said the engineer, panting.

"You are very stout, Mr. Starr," replied Harry, "and it's something too, you see, to live all one's life in the mine."

"Right, Harry. Formerly, when I was twenty, I could have gone down all at a breath. Come, forward!"

But just as the two were about to leave the platform, a voice, as yet far distant, was heard in the depths of the shaft. It came up like a sonorous billow, swelling as it advanced, and becoming more and more distinct.

"Halloo! who comes here?" asked the engineer, stopping Harry.

"I cannot say," answered the young miner.

"Is it not your father?"

"My father, Mr. Starr? no."

"Some neighbor, then?"

"We have no neighbors in the bottom of the pit," replied Harry. "We are alone, quite alone."

"Well, we must let this intruder pass," said James Starr. "Those who are descending must yield the path to those who are ascending."

They waited. The voice broke out again with a magnificent burst, as if it had been carried through a vast speaking trumpet; and soon a few words of a Scotch song came clearly to the ears of the young miner.

"The Hundred Pipers!" cried Harry. "Well, I shall be much surprised if that comes from the lungs of any man but Jack Ryan."

"And who is this Jack Ryan?" asked James Starr.

"An old mining comrade," replied Harry. Then leaning from the platform, "Halloo! Jack!" he shouted.

"Is that you, Harry?" was the reply. "Wait a bit, I'm coming." And the song broke forth again.

In a few minutes, a tall fellow of five and twenty, with a merry face, smiling eyes, a laughing mouth, and sandy hair, appeared at the bottom of the luminous cone which was thrown from his lantern, and set foot on the landing of the fifteenth ladder. His first act was to vigorously wring the hand which Harry extended to him.

"Delighted to meet you!" he exclaimed. "If I had only known you were to be above ground to-day, I would have spared myself going down the Yarrow shaft!"

"This is Mr. James Starr," said Harry, turning his lamp towards the engineer, who was in the shadow.

"Mr. Starr!" cried Jack Ryan. "Ah, sir, I could not see. Since I left the mine, my eyes have not been accustomed to see in the dark, as they

used to do."

"Ah, I remember a laddie who was always singing. That was ten years ago. It was you, no doubt?"

"Ay, Mr. Starr, but in changing my trade, I haven't changed my disposition. It's far better to laugh and sing than to cry and whine!"

"You're right there, Jack Ryan. And what do you do now, as you have left the mine?"

"I am working on the Melrose farm, forty miles from here. Ah, it's not like our Aberfoyle mines! The pick comes better to my hand than the spade or hoe. And then, in the old pit, there were vaulted roofs, to merrily echo one's songs, while up above ground!--But you are going to see old Simon, Mr. Starr?"

"Yes, Jack," answered the engineer.

"Don't let me keep you then."

"Tell me, Jack," said Harry, "what was taking you to our cottage to-day?"

"I wanted to see you, man," replied Jack, "and ask you to come to

the Irvine games. You know I am the piper of the place. There will be dancing and singing."

"Thank you, Jack, but it's impossible."

"Impossible?"

"Yes; Mr. Starr's visit will last some time, and I must take him back to Callander."

"Well, Harry, it won't be for a week yet. By that time Mr. Starr's visit will be over, I should think, and there will be nothing to keep you at the cottage."

"Indeed, Harry," said James Starr, "you must profit by your friend Jack's invitation."

"Well, I accept it, Jack," said Harry. "In a week we will meet at Irvine."

"In a week, that's settled," returned Ryan. "Good-by, Harry! Your servant, Mr. Starr. I am very glad to have seen you again! I can give news of you to all my friends. No one has forgotten you, sir."

"And I have forgotten no one," said Starr.

"Thanks for all, sir," replied Jack.

"Good-by, Jack," said Harry, shaking his hand. And Jack Ryan, singing as he went, soon disappeared in the heights of the shaft, dimly lighted by his lamp.

A quarter of an hour afterwards James Starr and Harry descended the last ladder, and set foot on the lowest floor of the pit.

From the bottom of the Yarrow shaft radiated numerous empty galleries. They ran through the wall of schist and sandstone, some shored up with great, roughly-hewn beams, others lined with a thick casing of wood. In every direction embankments supplied the place of the excavated veins. Artificial pillars were made of stone from neighboring quarries, and now they supported the ground, that is to say, the double layer of tertiary and quaternary soil, which formerly rested on the seam itself. Darkness now filled the galleries, formerly lighted either by the miner's lamp or by the electric light, the use of which had been introduced in the mines.

"Will you not rest a while, Mr. Starr?" asked the young man.

"No, my lad," replied the engineer, "for I am anxious to be at your father's cottage."

"Follow me then, Mr. Starr. I will guide you, and yet I daresay you

could find your way perfectly well through this dark labyrinth."

"Yes, indeed! I have the whole plan of the old pit still in my head."

Harry, followed by the engineer, and holding his lamp high the better to light their way, walked along a high gallery, like the nave of a cathedral. Their feet still struck against the wooden sleepers which used to support the rails.

They had not gone more than fifty paces, when a huge stone fell at the feet of James Starr. "Take care, Mr. Starr!" cried Harry, seizing the engineer by the arm.

"A stone, Harry! Ah! these old vaultings are no longer quite secure, of course, and--"

"Mr. Starr," said Harry Ford, "it seems to me that stone was thrown, thrown as by the hand of man!"

"Thrown!" exclaimed James Starr. "What do you mean, lad?"

"Nothing, nothing, Mr. Starr," replied Harry evasively, his anxious gaze endeavoring to pierce the darkness. "Let us go on. Take my arm, sir, and don't be afraid of making a false step."

"Here I am, Harry." And they both advanced, whilst Harry looked on

every side, throwing the light of his lamp into all the corners of the gallery.

"Shall we soon be there?" asked the engineer.

"In ten minutes at most."

"Good."

"But," muttered Harry, "that was a most singular thing. It is the first time such an accident has happened to me.

"That stone falling just at the moment we were passing."

"Harry, it was a mere chance."

"Chance," replied the young man, shaking his head. "Yes, chance." He stopped and listened.

"What is the matter, Harry?" asked the engineer.

"I thought I heard someone walking behind us," replied the young miner, listening more attentively. Then he added, "No, I must have been mistaken. Lean harder on my arm, Mr. Starr. Use me like a staff."

"A good solid staff, Harry," answered James Starr. "I could not wish for

a better than a fine fellow like you."

They continued in silence along the dark nave. Harry was evidently preoccupied, and frequently turned, trying to catch, either some distant noise, or remote glimmer of light.

But behind and before, all was silence and darkness.