

CHAPTER V. SOME STRANGE PHENOMENA

MANY superstitious beliefs exist both in the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland. Of course the mining population must furnish its contingent of legends and fables to this mythological repertory. If the fields are peopled with imaginary beings, either good or bad, with much more reason must the dark mines be haunted to their lowest depths. Who shakes the seam during tempestuous nights? who puts the miners on the track of an as yet unworked vein? who lights the fire-damp, and presides over the terrible explosions? who but some spirit of the mine? This, at least, was the opinion commonly spread among the superstitious Scotch.

In the first rank of the believers in the supernatural in the Dochart pit figured Jack Ryan, Harry's friend. He was the great partisan of all these superstitions. All these wild stories were turned by him into songs, which earned him great applause in the winter evenings.

But Jack Ryan was not alone in his belief. His comrades affirmed, no less strongly, that the Aberfoyle pits were haunted, and that certain strange beings were seen there frequently, just as in the Highlands. To hear them talk, it would have been more extraordinary if nothing of the kind appeared. Could there indeed be a better place than a dark and deep coal mine for the freaks of fairies, elves, goblins, and other actors in the fantastical dramas? The scenery was all ready, why should not the supernatural personages come there to play their parts?

So reasoned Jack Ryan and his comrades in the Aberfoyle mines. We have said that the different pits communicated with each other by means of long subterranean galleries. Thus there existed beneath the county of Stirling a vast tract, full of burrows, tunnels, bored with caves, and perforated with shafts, a subterranean labyrinth, which might be compared to an enormous ant-hill.

Miners, though belonging to different pits, often met, when going to or returning from their work. Consequently there was a constant opportunity of exchanging talk, and circulating the stories which had their origin in the mine, from one pit to another. These accounts were transmitted with marvelous rapidity, passing from mouth to mouth, and gaining in wonder as they went.

Two men, however, better educated and with more practical minds than the rest, had always resisted this temptation. They in no degree believed in the intervention of spirits, elves, or goblins. These two were Simon Ford and his son. And they proved it by continuing to inhabit the dismal crypt, after the desertion of the Dochart pit. Perhaps good Madge, like every Highland woman, had some leaning towards the supernatural. But she had to repeat all these stories to herself, and so she did, most conscientiously, so as not to let the old traditions be lost.

Even had Simon and Harry Ford been as credulous as their companions, they would not have abandoned the mine to the imps and fairies. For ten

years, without missing a single day, obstinate and immovable in their convictions, the father and son took their picks, their sticks, and their lamps. They went about searching, sounding the rock with a sharp blow, listening if it would return a favorable sound. So long as the soundings had not been pushed to the granite of the primary formation, the Fords were agreed that the search, unsuccessful to-day, might succeed to-morrow, and that it ought to be resumed. They spent their whole life in endeavoring to bring Aberfoyle back to its former prosperity. If the father died before the hour of success, the son was to go on with the task alone.

It was during these excursions that Harry was more particularly struck by certain phenomena, which he vainly sought to explain. Several times, while walking along some narrow cross-alley, he seemed to hear sounds similar to those which would be produced by violent blows of a pickax against the wall.

Harry hastened to seek the cause of this mysterious work. The tunnel was empty. The light from the young miner's lamp, thrown on the wall, revealed no trace of any recent work with pick or crowbar. Harry would then ask himself if it was not the effect of some acoustic illusion, or some strange and fantastic echo. At other times, on suddenly throwing a bright light into a suspicious-looking cleft in the rock, he thought he saw a shadow. He rushed forward. Nothing, and there was no opening to permit a human being to evade his pursuit!

Twice in one month, Harry, whilst visiting the west end of the pit, distinctly heard distant reports, as if some miner had exploded a charge of dynamite. The second time, after many careful researches, he found that a pillar had just been blown up.

By the light of his lamp, Harry carefully examined the place attacked by the explosion. It had not been made in a simple embankment of stones, but in a mass of schist, which had penetrated to this depth in the coal stratum. Had the object of the explosion been to discover a new vein? Or had someone wished simply to destroy this portion of the mine? Thus he questioned, and when he made known this occurrence to his father, neither could the old overman nor he himself answer the question in a satisfactory way.

"It is very queer," Harry often repeated. "The presence of an unknown being in the mine seems impossible, and yet there can be no doubt about it. Does someone besides ourselves wish to find out if a seam yet exists? Or, rather, has he attempted to destroy what remains of the Aberfoyle mines? But for what reason? I will find that out, if it should cost me my life!"

A fortnight before the day on which Harry Ford guided the engineer through the labyrinth of the Dochart pit, he had been on the point of attaining the object of his search. He was going over the southwest end of the mine, with a large lantern in his hand. All at once, it seemed to him that a light was suddenly extinguished, some hundred feet before

him, at the end of a narrow passage cut obliquely through the rock. He darted forward.

His search was in vain. As Harry would not admit a supernatural explanation for a physical occurrence, he concluded that certainly some strange being prowled about in the pit. But whatever he could do, searching with the greatest care, scrutinizing every crevice in the gallery, he found nothing for his trouble.

If Jack Ryan and the other superstitious fellows in the mine had seen these lights, they would, without fail, have called them supernatural, but Harry did not dream of doing so, nor did his father. And when they talked over these phenomena, evidently due to a physical cause, "My lad," the old man would say, "we must wait. It will all be explained some day."

However, it must be observed that, hitherto, neither Harry nor his father had ever been exposed to any act of violence. If the stone which had fallen at the feet of James Starr had been thrown by the hand of some ill-disposed person, it was the first criminal act of that description.

James Starr was of opinion that the stone had become detached from the roof of the gallery; but Harry would not admit of such a simple explanation. According to him, the stone had not fallen, it had been thrown; for otherwise, without rebounding, it could never have described

a trajectory as it did.

Harry saw in it a direct attempt against himself and his father, or even against the engineer.