

CHAPTER X. COAL TOWN

THREE years after the events which have just been related, the guide-books recommended as a "great attraction," to the numerous tourists who roam over the county of Stirling, a visit of a few hours to the mines of New Aberfoyle.

No mine in any country, either in the Old or New World, could present a more curious aspect.

To begin with, the visitor was transported without danger or fatigue to a level with the workings, at fifteen hundred feet below the surface of the ground. Seven miles to the southwest of Callander opened a slanting tunnel, adorned with a castellated entrance, turrets and battlements. This lofty tunnel gently sloped straight to the stupendous crypt, hollowed out so strangely in the bowels of the earth.

A double line of railway, the wagons being moved by hydraulic power, plied from hour to hour to and from the village thus buried in the subsoil of the county, and which bore the rather ambitious title of Coal Town.

Arrived in Coal Town, the visitor found himself in a place where electricity played a principal part as an agent of heat and light. Although the ventilation shafts were numerous, they were not sufficient

to admit much daylight into New Aberfoyle, yet it had abundance of light. This was shed from numbers of electric discs; some suspended from the vaulted roofs, others hanging on the natural pillars--all, whether suns or stars in size, were fed by continuous currents produced from electro-magnetic machines. When the hour of rest arrived, an artificial night was easily produced all over the mine by disconnecting the wires.

Below the dome lay a lake of an extent to be compared to the Dead Sea of the Mammoth caves--a deep lake whose transparent waters swarmed with eyeless fish, and to which the engineer gave the name of Loch Malcolm.

There, in this immense natural excavation, Simon Ford built his new cottage, which he would not have exchanged for the finest house in Prince's Street, Edinburgh. This dwelling was situated on the shores of the loch, and its five windows looked out on the dark waters, which extended further than the eye could see. Two months later a second habitation was erected in the neighborhood of Simon Ford's cottage: this was for James Starr. The engineer had given himself body and soul to New Aberfoyle, and nothing but the most imperative necessity ever caused him to leave the pit. There, then, he lived in the midst of his mining world.

On the discovery of the new field, all the old colliers had hastened to leave the plow and harrow, and resume the pick and mattock. Attracted by the certainty that work would never fail, allured by the high wages which the prosperity of the mine enabled the company to offer for labor,

they deserted the open air for an underground life, and took up their abode in the mines.

The miners' houses, built of brick, soon grew up in a picturesque fashion; some on the banks of Loch Malcolm, others under the arches which seemed made to resist the weight that pressed upon them, like the piers of a bridge. So was founded Coal Town, situated under the eastern point of Loch Katrine, to the north of the county of Stirling. It was a regular settlement on the banks of Loch Malcolm. A chapel, dedicated to St. Giles, overlooked it from the top of a huge rock, whose foot was laved by the waters of the subterranean sea.

When this underground town was lighted up by the bright rays thrown from the discs, hung from the pillars and arches, its aspect was so strange, so fantastic, that it justified the praise of the guide-books, and visitors flocked to see it.

It is needless to say that the inhabitants of Coal Town were proud of their place. They rarely left their laboring village--in that imitating Simon Ford, who never wished to go out again. The old overman maintained that it always rained "up there," and, considering the climate of the United Kingdom, it must be acknowledged that he was not far wrong. All the families in New Aberfoyle prospered well, having in three years obtained a certain competency which they could never have hoped to attain on the surface of the county. Dozens of babies, who were born at the time when the works were resumed, had never yet breathed the outer

air.

This made Jack Ryan remark, "It's eighteen months since they were weaned, and they have not yet seen daylight!"

It may be mentioned here, that one of the first to run at the engineer's call was Jack Ryan. The merry fellow had thought it his duty to return to his old trade. But though Melrose farm had lost singer and piper it must not be thought that Jack Ryan sung no more. On the contrary, the sonorous echoes of New Aberfoyle exerted their strong lungs to answer him.

Jack Ryan took up his abode in Simon Ford's new cottage. They offered him a room, which he accepted without ceremony, in his frank and hearty way. Old Madge loved him for his fine character and good nature. She in some degree shared his ideas on the subject of the fantastic beings who were supposed to haunt the mine, and the two, when alone, told each other stories wild enough to make one shudder--stories well worthy of enriching the hyperborean mythology.

Jack thus became the life of the cottage. He was, besides being a jovial companion, a good workman. Six months after the works had begun, he was made head of a gang of hewers.

"That was a good work done, Mr. Ford," said he, a few days after his appointment. "You discovered a new field, and though you narrowly

escaped paying for the discovery with your life--well, it was not too dearly bought."

"No, Jack, it was a good bargain we made that time!" answered the old overman. "But neither Mr. Starr nor I have forgotten that to you we owe our lives."

"Not at all," returned Jack. "You owe them to your son Harry, when he had the good sense to accept my invitation to Irvine."

"And not to go, isn't that it?" interrupted Harry, grasping his comrade's hand. "No, Jack, it is to you, scarcely healed of your wounds--to you, who did not delay a day, no, nor an hour, that we owe our being found still alive in the mine!"

"Rubbish, no!" broke in the obstinate fellow. "I won't have that said, when it's no such thing. I hurried to find out what had become of you, Harry, that's all. But to give everyone his due, I will add that without that unapproachable goblin--"

"Ah, there we are!" cried Ford. "A goblin!"

"A goblin, a brownie, a fairy's child," repeated Jack Ryan, "a cousin of the Fire-Maidens, an Urisk, whatever you like! It's not the less certain that without it we should never have found our way into the gallery, from which you could not get out."

"No doubt, Jack," answered Harry. "It remains to be seen whether this being was as supernatural as you choose to believe."

"Supernatural!" exclaimed Ryan. "But it was as supernatural as a Will-o'-the-Wisp, who may be seen skipping along with his lantern in his hand; you may try to catch him, but he escapes like a fairy, and vanishes like a shadow! Don't be uneasy, Harry, we shall see it again some day or other!"

"Well, Jack," said Simon Ford, "Will-o'-the-Wisp or not, we shall try to find it, and you must help us."

"You'll get into a scrap if you don't take care, Mr. Ford!" responded Jack Ryan.

"We'll see about that, Jack!"

We may easily imagine how soon this domain of New Aberfoyle became familiar to all the members of the Ford family, but more particularly to Harry. He learnt to know all its most secret ins and outs. He could even say what point of the surface corresponded with what point of the mine. He knew that above this seam lay the Firth of Clyde, that there extended Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine. Those columns supported a spur of the Grampian mountains. This vault served as a basement to Dumbarton. Above this large pond passed the Balloch railway. Here ended the Scottish

coast. There began the sea, the tumult of which could be distinctly heard during the equinoctial gales. Harry would have been a first-rate guide to these natural catacombs, and all that Alpine guides do on their snowy peaks in daylight he could have done in the dark mine by the wonderful power of instinct.

He loved New Aberfoyle. Many times, with his lamp stuck in his hat, did he penetrate its furthest depths. He explored its ponds in a skillfully-managed canoe. He even went shooting, for numerous birds had been introduced into the crypt--pintails, snipes, ducks, who fed on the fish which swarmed in the deep waters. Harry's eyes seemed made for the dark, just as a sailor's are made for distances. But all this while Harry felt irresistibly animated by the hope of finding the mysterious being whose intervention, strictly speaking, had saved himself and his friends. Would he succeed? He certainly would, if presentiments were to be trusted; but certainly not, if he judged by the success which had as yet attended his researches.

The attacks directed against the family of the old overman, before the discovery of New Aberfoyle, had not been renewed.