ABAFT THE FUNNEL - - - - - By Rudyard Kipling

Thirteenth of a Series of Little Known Stories by the Famous Author, Appearing Each Sunday in "The Sun," Which Represent His Earlier Style

The whistle rose to an ear-splitting shriek and a naked soul flashed past me.

LAST OF THE STORIES

Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion.—*Ecc.* iii, 22.

"KENCH with a long hand, lazy one," I said to the punkah coolie. "But I am tired," said the coolie. "Then go to Jehannum and get another man to pull," I replied, which was rude, and when you come to think of it, unnecessary.

"Happy thought—go to Jehannum!" said a voice at my elbow. I turned and saw seated on the edge of my bed a large and luminous Devil. "I'm not afraid," I said. "You're an illusion bred by too much tobacco and not enough sleep. If I look at you steadily for a minute you will disappear. You are an ignis fatuus."

"Fatuous yourself!" answered the Devil blandly. "Do you mean to say you don't know me?" He snivelled up to the size of a blob of sediment on the end of a pen and I recognized my old friend the Devil of Discontent, who lived in the bottom of the ink pot, but emerges half a day after each story has been printed with a host of useless suggestions for its betterment.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" I said. "You're not due till next week. Get back to your ink pot."

"Hush!" said the Devil. "I have an idea."

"Too late, as usual. I know your ways."

"No. It's a perfectly practicable one. Your swearing at the coolie suggested it. Did you ever hear of a man called Dante—charmin' fellow, friend o' mine?"

"'Dante once prepared to paint a picture,'" I quoted.

"Yes. I inspired that notion—but never mind. Are you willing to play Dante to my Virgil? I can't guarantee a nine circle inferno, any more than you can turn out a cantoed epic, but there's absolutely no risk, and—it will run to three columns at least."

"But what sort of Hell do you own?" I said. "I fancied your operations were mostly above ground. You have no jurisdiction over the dead."

"Sainted Leopardi!" rapped the Devil, resuming natural size. "Is that all you know? I'm proprietor of one of the largest hells in existence—the Limbo of Lost Endeavor, where the souls of all the characters go."

"Characters? What characters?"

"All the characters that are drawn in books, painted in novels, sketched in magazine articles, thumbnailed in feuilletons or in any way created by anybody and everybody who has had the fortune or misfortune to put his or her writings into print."

"That sounds like a quotation from a prospectus. What do you herd characters for? Aren't there enough souls in the universe?"

"Who possess souls and who do not? For aught you can prove, man may be soulless and the creatures he writes about immortal. Anyhow, about a hundred years after printing became an established nuisance the loose characters used to blow about interplanetary space in legions which interfered with traffic. So they were collected and their charge became mine by right. Would you care to see them. Your own are there."

"That decides me. But is it hotter than northern India?"

"On my Devildom, no. Put your arms round my neck and sit tight. I'm going to dive!"

He plunged from the bed headfirst into the floor. There was a smell of jail durrie and damp earth; and then fell the black darkness of night.

* * *

We stood before a door in a topless wall, from the further side of which came faintly the roar of infernal fires.

"But you said there was no danger!" I cried in an extremity of terror.

"No more there is," said the Devil. "That's only the furnace of first edition. Will you go on? No other human being has set foot here in the flesh. Let me bring the door to your notice. Pretty design, isn't it? A joke of the master's."

I shuddered, for the door was nothing more than a coffin, the backboard knocked out, set on end in the thickness of the wall. As I hesitated, the silence of space was cut by a sharp, shrill whistle, like that of a live shell, which rapidly grew louder and louder. "Get away from the door," said the Devil of Discontent quickly. "Here's a soul coming to its place." I took refuge under the broad vans of the Devil's wings. The whistle rose to an ear splitting shriek and a naked soul flashed past me.

"Always the same," said the Devil quietly. "These little writers are so anxious to reach their reward. H'm, I don't think he likes this'n, though." A yell of despair reached my ears and I shuddered afresh. "Who was he?" I asked. "Hack writer for a pornographic firm in Belgium, exporting to London, you'll understand presently—and now we'll go in," said the Devil. "I must apoligize for that creature's rudeness. He should have stopped at the distance signal for line clear. You can hear the souls whistling there now."

"Are they souls of men?" I whispered.

"Yes—writer men. That's why they are so shrill and querulous. Welcome to the Limbo of Lost Endeavor!"

They passed into a domed hall, more vast than visions could embrace, crowded to its limit by men, women and children. Round the eye of the dome ran a flickering fire, that terrible quotation from Job: "Oh, that mine enemy had written a book!"

"Neat, isn't it?" said the Devil, following my glance. "Another joke of the Master's. Man of Us, y' know. In the old days we used to put the characters into a disused circle of Dante's Inferno, but they grew overcrowded. So Balzac and Theophile Gautier were commissioned to write up this building. It took them three years to complete, and is one of the finest under earth. Don't attempt to describe it unless you are quite sure you are equal to Balzac and Gautier in collaboration. Look at the crowds and tell me what you think of them."

I looked long and earnestly and saw that many of the multitude were cripples. They walked on their heels or their toes, or with a list to the right or left. A few of them possessed odd eyes and particolored hair; more threw themselves into absurd and impossible attitudes; and every fourth woman seemed to be weeping.

"Who are these?" I said.

"Mainly the population of three volume novels that never reach the six shilling stage. See that beautiful girl with one gray eye and one brown, and the black and yellow hair? Let her be an awful warning to you how you correct your proofs. She was created by a careless writer a month ago, and he changed all colors in the second volume. So she came here as you see her. There will be trouble when she meets her author. He can't alter her now and she says she'll accept no apology."

"But when will she meet her author?"

"Not in my department. Do you notice a general air of expectancy among all the characters? They are waiting for their authors. Look! That explains the system better than I can."

A lovely maiden, at whose feet I would willingly have fallen and worshipped, detached herself from the crowd and hastened to the door through which I had just come. There was a prolonged whistle without, a soul dashed through the coffin and fell upon her neck. The girl with the particolored hair eyed the couple enviously as they departed arm in arm to the other side of the hall.

"That man," said the Devil, "wrote one magazine story, of twenty-four pages, ten years ago when he was desperately in love with a flesh and blood woman. He put all his heart into the work and created the girl you have just seen. The flesh and blood woman married some one else and died—it's a way they have—but the man has this girl for his very own and she will everlastingly grow sweeter."

"Then the characters are independent?"

"Slightly! Have you never known one of your characters—even yours—get beyond control as soon as they are made?"

"That's true. Where are those two happy creatures going?"

"To the levels. You've heard of authors finding their levels? We keep all the levels here. As each writer enters he picks up his characters, or they pick him up, as the case may be, and to the levels he goes."

"I should like to see——"

"So you shall, when you come through that door a second time—whistling. I can't take you there now."

"Do you keep only the characters of living scribblers in this hall?"

"We should be crowded out if we didn't draft them off somehow. Step this way and I'll take you to the master. One moment, though. There's John Ridd with Lorna Doone and there are Mr. Malphant and the Bormalacks—clannish folk, those Besant characters—don't let the twins talk to you about Literature and Art. Come along. What's here?"

The white face of Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, broke through the press. "I wish to explain," said he in a level voice, "that had I been consulted I should never have blown out my brains with the Duchess and all that poker flat lot. I wish to add that the only woman I ever loved was the wife of Brown of Calaveras." He pressed his hand behind him suggestively. "All right, Mr. Oakhurst," I said hastily; "I believe you." "Kin you set it right?" he asked, dropping into the Doric of the gulches. I caught a trigger's cloth muffled click. "Just heavens!" I groaned. "Must I be shot for the sake of another man's characters?" Oakhurst levelled his revolver at my head, but the weapon was struck up by the hand of Yuba Bill. "You durned fool!" said the stage driver. "Hevn't I told you no one but a blamed idiot shoots at sight now? Let the galoot go. You kin see by his eyes he's no party to your matrimonial arrangements." Oakhurst retired with an irreproachable bow, but in my haste to escape I fell over Caliban, his head in a melon and his tame orc under his arm. He spat like a wildcat.

"Manners none, customs beastly," said the Devil. "We'll take the Bishop with us. They all respect the Bishop." And the great Bishop Blougram joined us, calm and smiling, with the news, for my private ear, that Mr. Gigadibs despised him no longer.

We were arrested by a knot of seminude Bacchantes kissing a clergyman. The Bishop's eyes twinkled and I turned to the Devil for explanation.

"That's Robert Elsmere—what's left of him," said the Devil. "Those are French feuilleton women and scourings of the Opera Comique. He has been lecturing 'em and they don't like it." "He lectured me!" said the Bishop with a bland smile. "He has been a nuisance ever since he came here. By the holy law of proportion, he had the audacity to talk to the master! Called him a 'pot bellied barbarian'! That is why he is walking so stiffly now," said the Devil. "Listen! Marie Pigeonnier is swearing deathless love to him. On my word, we ought to segregate the French characters entirely. By the way, your regiment came in very handy for Zola's importations."

"My regiment?" I said. "How do you mean?"

"You wrote something about the Tyneside Tail Twisters, just enough to give the outline of the regiment, and of course it came down here—one thousand and eighty strong. I told it off in hollow squares to pen up the Rougon-Macquart series. There they are." I looked and saw the Tyneside Tail Twisters ringing an inferno of struggling, shouting, blaspheming men and women in the costumes of the Second Empire. Now and again the shadowy ranks brought down their butts on the toes of the crowd inside the square and shrieks of pain followed. "You should have indicated your men more clearly; they are hardly up to their work," said the Devil. "If the Zola tribe increase, I'm afraid I shall have to use up your two companies of the Black Tyrone and two of the Old Regiment."

"I am proud——" I began.

"Go slow," said the Devil. "You won't be half so proud in a little while, and I don't think much of your regiments anyway. But they are good enough to fight the French. Can you hear Coupeau raving in the left angle of the square? He used to run about the hall seeing pink snakes till the children's story book characters protested. Come along!"

Never since Caxton pulled his first proof and made for the world a new and most terrible god of labor had mortal man such an experience as mine when I followed the Devil of Discontent through the shifting crowds below the motto of the dome. A few—a very few—of the faces were of old friends, but there were thousands whom I did not recognize. Men in every conceivable attire and of every possible nationality, deformed by intention or the impotence of creation that could not create—blind, unclean, heroic, mad, sinking under the weight of remorse or with eyes made splendid by the light of love and fixed endeavor; women fashioned in ignorance and mourning the errors of their creator, life and thought at variance with body and soul; perfect women such as walk rarely upon this earth, and horrors that were women only because they had not sufficient self-control to be fiends; little children, fair as the morning, who put their hands into mine and made most innocent confidences; loathsome, lank haired infant saints, curious as to the welfare of my soul, and delightfully mischievous boys generalled by the irrepressible Tom Sawyer, who played among murderers, harlots, professional beauties, nuns, Italian bandits and politicians of state.

The ordered peace of Arthur's court was broken up by the incursions of John Wellington Wells, and Dagonet, the jester, found that his antics drew no attention so long as the "dealer in magic and spells," taking Tristram's harp, sang patter songs to the Round Table; while a Zulu Impi, headed by Allan Quatermain, wheeled and shouted in sham fight for the pleasure of Little Lord Fauntleroy. Every century and every type was jumbled in the confusion of one colossal fancy ball where all the characters were living their parts.

"Aye, look long," said the Devil. "You will never be able to describe it, and the next time you come you won't have the chance. Look long, and look at"—Good's passing with a maiden of the Zu-Vendi must have suggested the idea—"look at their legs." I looked and for the second time noticed the lameness that seemed to be almost universal in the Limbo of Lost Endeavor. Brave men and stalwart to all appearance had one leg shorter than the other; some paced a few inches above the floor, never touching it, and others found the greatest difficulty in preserving their feet at all. The stiffness and labored gait of these thousands was pitiful to witness. I was sorry for them. I told the Devil as much.

"H'm," said he reflectively, "that's the world's work. Rather cockeye, ain't it? They do everything but stand on their feet. You could improve them, I suppose?" There was an unpleasant sneer in his tone and I hastened to change the subject.

"I'm tired of walking," I said. "I want to see some of my own characters, and go on to the master, whoever he may be, afterward."

"Reflect," said the Devil. "Are you certain—do you know how many they be?"

"No—but I want to see them. That's what I came for."

"Very well. Don't abuse me if you don't like the view. There are one and fifty of your make up to date, and—it's rather an appalling thing to be confronted with fifty-one children. However, here's a special favorite of yours. Go and shake hands with her!"

A limp jointed, staring eyed doll was hirpling toward me with a strained smile of recognition. I felt that I knew her only too well—if indeed she were she. "Keep her off, Devil!" I cried, stepping back. "I never made that!" "'She began to weep and she began to cry, Lord ha' mercy on me, this is none of I!' You're very rude to Mrs. Hauksbee, and she wants to speak to you," said the Devil. My face must have betrayed my dismay, for the Devil went on soothingly: "That's as she is, remember. I knew you wouldn't like it. Now what will you give if I make her as she ought to be? No, I don't want your soul, thanks. I have it already, and many others of better quality. Will you, when you write your story, own that I am the best and greatest of all the devils?" The doll was creeping nearer. "Yes," I said hurriedly. "Anything you like. Only I can't stand her in that state."

"You'll have to when you come next again. Look! No connection with Jekyll and Hyde!" The Devil pointed a lean and inky finger toward the doll and lo! radiant, bewitching, with a smile of dainty malice, her high heels clicking on the floor like castanets, advanced Mrs. Hauksbee as I had imagined her in the beginning.

"Ah!" she said. "You are here so soon? Not dead yet? That will come. Meantime a thousand congratulations. And now, what do you think of me?" She put her hands on her hips, revealed a glimpse of the smallest foot in Simla and hummed: "Just look at that * * * just look at this! And then you'll see I'm not amiss."

"She'll use exactly the same words when you meet her next time," said the Devil warningly. "You dowered her with any amount of vanity, if you left out—— Excuse me a minute! I'll fetch up the rest of your menagerie." But I was looking at Mrs. Hauksbee.

"Well?" she said. "Am I what you expected?" I forgot the Devil and all his works, forgot that this was not the woman I had made, and could only murmur rapturously: "By jove! You are a beauty." Then, incautiously: "And you stand on your feet." "Good heavens!" said Mrs. Hauksbee. "Would you, at my time of life, have me stand on my head?" She folded her arms and looked me up and down. I was grinning imbecilely—the woman was so alive. "Talk," I said absently; "I want to hear you talk." "I am not used to being spoken to like a coolie," she replied. "Never mind," I said, "that may be for outsiders, but I made you and I've a right——"

"You have a right? You made me? My dear sir, if I didn't know that we should bore each other so inextinguishably hereafter I should read you an hour's lecture this instant. You made me! I suppose you will have the audacity to pretend that you understand me—that you ever understood me. Oh, man, man—foolish man! If you only knew!"

"Is that the person who thinks he understands us, Loo?" drawled a voice at her elbow. The Devil had returned with a cloud of witnesses and it was Mrs. Mallowe who was speaking.

"What insolence!" said Mrs. Hauksbee between her teeth. "This isn't a Peterhoff drawing room. I haven't the slightest intention of being leveed by this person. Polly, come here and we'll watch the animals go by." She and Mrs. Mallowe stood at my side. I turned crimson with shame, for it is an awful thing to see one's characters in the solid.

I turned to the company and saw that they were men and women, standing upon their feet as folks should stand. Again I forgot the Devil, who stood apart and sneered. From the distant door of entry I could hear the whistle of arriving souls, from the semi-darkness at the end of the hall came the thunderous roar of the furnace of first editions and everywhere the restless crowds of characters muttered and rustled like windblown autumn leaves. But I looked upon my own people and was perfectly content as man could be.

"I have seen you study a new dress with just such an expression of idiotic beatitude," whispered Mrs. Mallowe to Mrs. Hauksbee. "Hush!" said the latter. "He thinks he understands." Then to me: "Please trot them out. Eternity is long enough in all conscience, but that is no reason for wasting it. Pro-ceed, or shall I call them up? Mrs. Vansuythen, Mr. Boult, Mrs. Boult, Capt. Kurrel and the Major!" The European population in Kashima in the Dosehri hills, the actors in the Wayside Comedy, moved toward me; and I saw with delight that they were human. "So you wrote about us?" said Mrs. Boult. "About my confession to my husband and my hatred of that Vansuythen woman? Did you think that you understood? Are all men such fools?" "That woman is bad form," said Mrs. Hauksbee, "but she speaks the truth. I wonder what these soldiers have to say." Gunner Barnabas and Private Shacklock stopped, saluted and hoped I would take no offence if they gave it as their opinion that I had not "got them down quite right." I gasped.

A spurred hussar succeeded, his wife on his arm. It was Capt. Gadsby and Minnie and close behind them swaggered Jack Maillin, the Brigadier-General in his arms. "Had the cheek to try to describe our life, had you?" said Gadsby carelessly. "Ha-hmm! S'pose he understood, Minnie?" Mrs. Gadsby raised her face to her husband and murmured: "I'm sure he didn't, Pip," while Poor Dear Mamma, still in her riding habit hissed: "I'm sure he didn't understand me." And these also went their way.

One after another they filed by—Trewinnard, the pet of his department; Otis Yeere, lean and lanthorn jawed; Crook O'Neil and Bobby Wick arm in arm; Janki Meah, the blind miner in the Jamahari coal fields; Afzul Kahn, the policeman; the murderous Pathan horse-dealer, Durga Dass; the bunnia, Boh Da Thone; the dacoit Dana Da, weaver of false magic; the Leander of the Barhwi ford; Peg Barney drunk as a coot; Mrs. Delville, the dowd; Dinah Shadd, large, red cheeked and resolute; Simmons, Slane and Losson; Georgie Porgie and his Burmese helpmate; a shadow in a high collar, who was all that I had ever indicated of the Hawley Boy—the nameless men and women who had trod the Hill of Illusion and lived in the Tents of Kedar, and last, his Majesty the King.

Each one in passing told me the same tale, and the burden thereof was: "You did not understand." My heart turned sick within me. "Where's Wee Willie Winkie?" I shouted. "Little children don't lie."

A clatter of pony's feet followed and the child appeared, habited as on the day he rode into Afghan territory to warn Coppy's love against the "bad men." "I've been playing," he sobbed, "playing on ve Levels wiv Jackanapes and Lollo, an' he says I'm only just borrowed. I'm isn't borrowed. I'm Willie Wi-inkie! Vere's Coppy?"

"'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,'" whispered the Devil, who had drawn nearer. "You know the rest of the proverb. Don't look as if you were going to be shot in the morning! Here are the last of your gang."

I turned despairingly to the Three Musketeers, dearest of all my children to me—to Privates Mulvaney, Ortheris and Learoyd. Surely the Three would not turn against me as the others had done! I shook hands with Mulvaney. "Terence, how goes? Are you going to make fun of me too?" "'Tis not for me to make fun av you, sorr," said the Irishman, "knowin' as I do know fwat good friends we've been for the matter av three years."

"Fower," said Ortheris, "'twas in the Helanthami barricks, H block, we was become acquaint, an' 'ere's thankin' you kindly for all the beer we've drunk twix' that and now."

"Four ut is, then," said Mulvaney. "He an' Dinah Shadd are your friends, but——" He stood uneasily.

"But what?" I said.

"Savin' your presence, sorr, an' it's more than onwillin' I am to be hurtin' you; you did not onderstand. On my sowl an' honour, sorr, you did not onderstand. Come along, you two."

But Ortheris stayed for a moment to whisper: "It's Gawd's own trewth, but there's this 'ere to think. Taint the bloomin' belt that's wrong, as Peg Barney sez, when he's up for bein' dirty on p'rade. 'Tain't the bloomin' belt, sir; it's the bloomin' pipeclay.' Ere I could seek an explanation he had joined his companions.

"For a private soldier, a singularly shrewd man," said Mrs. Hauksbee, and she repeated Ortheris's words. The last drop filled my cup and I am ashamed to say that I bade her be quiet in a wholly unjustifiable tone. I was rewarded by what would have been a notable lecture on propriety, had I not said to the Devil: "Change that woman to a d——d doll again! Change 'em all back as they were—as they are I'm sick of them."

"Poor wretch!" said the Devil of Discontent very quietly. "They are changed."

The reproof died on Mrs. Hauksbee's lips and she moved away marionette fashion, Mrs. Mallowe trailing after her. I hastened after the remainder of the characters and they were changed indeed—even as the Devil had said, who kept at my side.

They limped and stuttered and staggered and mouthed and staggered round me, till I could endure no more.

"So I am the master of this idiotic puppet show, am I?" I said bitterly, watching Mulvaney trying to come to attention by spasms.

"In saecula saeculorum," said the Devil, bowing his head; "and you needn't kick, my dear fellow, because they will concern no one but yourself by the time you whistle up to the door. Stop reviling me and uncover. Here's the master!"

Uncover! I would have dropped on my knees had not the Devil prevented me, at sight of the portly form of Maitre Francois Rabelais, some time Cure of Meudon. He wore a smoke stained apron of the colors of Gargantua. I made a sign which was duly returned. "An Entered Apprentice in difficulties with his rough ashlar, Worshipful Sir," explained the Devil. I was too angry to speak.

Said the master, rubbing his chin, "Are those things yours?" "Even so, Worshipful Sir," I muttered, praying inwardly that the characters would at least keep quiet while the master was near. He touched one or two thoughtfully, put his hand upon my shoulder and started: "By the Great Bells of Notre Dame, you are in the flesh—the warm flesh! The flesh I quitted so long—ah, so long! And you fret and behave unseemly because of these shadows. Listen now! I, even I, would give my Three, Panurge, Gargantua and Pantagruel, for one little hour of the life that is in you. And I am the master!

But the words gave me no comfort. I could hear Mrs. Mallowe's joints cracking—or it might have been merely her stays.

"Worshipful Sir, he will not believe that," said the Devil. "Who live by shadows lust for shadows. Tell him something more to his need."

The master grunted contemptuously: "And he is flesh and blood! Know this, then. The First Law is to make them stand upon their feet, and the Second is to make them stand upon their feet, and the Third is to make them stand upon their feet. But, for all that, Trajan is a fisher of frogs." He passed on, and I could hear him say to himself: "One hour—one minute—of life in the flesh and I would sell the Great Perhaps thrice over!"

"Well," said the Devil, "you've made the master angry, seen about all there is to be seen, except the Furnace of First Edition, and, as the master is in charge of that, I should avoid it. Now you'd better go. You know what you ought to do?"

"I don't need all Hell——"

"Pardon me. Better men than you have called this Paradise."

"All Hell, I said, and the master to tell me what I knew before. What I want to know is how?" "Go and find out," said the Devil. We turned to the door, and I was aware that my characters had grouped themselves at the exit. "They are going to give you an ovation. Think o' that, now!" said the Devil. I shuddered and dropped my eyes while one and fifty voices broke into a wailing song, whereof the words so far as I recollect, ran:

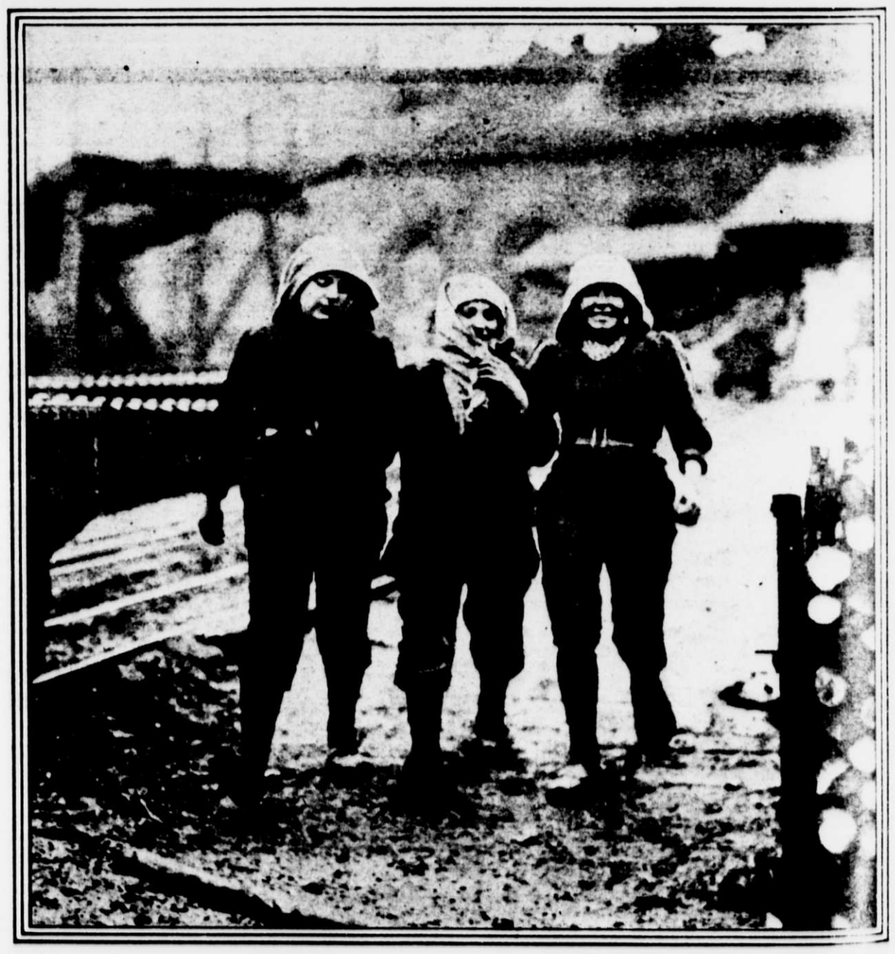
But we brought forth and reared in hours
Of change, alarm, surprise.
What shelter to grow ripe is ours—
What leisure to grow wise?

I ran the gantlet, narrowly missed collision with an impetuous soul (I hoped he liked his characters when he met them), and flung free into the night, where I should have knocked my head against the stars. But the Devil caught me.

The brain fever bird was flitting across the gray, dewy morn, and the punkah had stopped again. "Go to Jehannum and get another man to pull," I said drowsily. "Exactly," said a voice from the inkpot.

Now the proof that this story is absolutely true lies in the fact that there will be no other to follow it.

BELGIAN GIRLS WORKING IN MINES



The young women of the Belgian coal fields around Charleroi, in territory now occupied by the Germans, have gone into the pits to take the places of their husbands, fathers and brothers who are fighting in Europe. Their work supplies fuel for Belgium and their earnings support their impoverished homes. The illustration shows three who have been at work under ground leaving the pit.