

CRYSTAL AMONG COAL

Entry No. 42 in Our Prize Story Competition

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"The Stables and Deadwork Are Afire!"

MRS. DUNFORD fastened a long motor veil over her cap and tied the ends under her chin. Her husband had donned an old buff rubber coat which hid his fashionable garments. His own hat lay on the table; a greasy miner's cap was pulled over his scant iron gray hair. A feeling of aversion more intense than usual came over his handsome wife; for between him and the rough miners that stood about all visible and external differences had vanished. The features of this New York mine broker were heavy and plain and coarse as theirs; but they were harder too, the eyes small and crafty, the whole face lacking the hearty, simple kindness that redeemed these begrimed and sooty faces. Even the cropped mustache and side whiskers he had lately affected had lost their distinction.

Lawrence Dunford surveyed all things with critical and expert eye. He was about to purchase the Poole-Kethley Colliery, and knew anthracite mines of old. Sixteen years ago he had been superintendent of the Darvene Colliery at Kennesbarre, thirty miles to the east. Yesterday, when he was about to leave New York on this errand of inspection, his wife had begged him to take her with him. In her request there had been an insistent and unusual wistfulness he could not understand—but then there was much in her he could never understand. She had always hated or pretended to hate these black mining regions of Pennsylvania, where she had been born and where he had first met her as a very young woman. Something reminiscent stirred within him, something that touched upon some hidden, unblunted nerve, called into life by this haunting, dark, and unforgotten glamour of the mines.

He glanced at his wife. She too seemed under the spell. Was she, like him, thinking of Kennesbarre,—Kennesbarre that meant so much to both? He felt that the thought of her thought was bitter to him.

THREE empty iron cars stood on the slanting track beneath the hoisting shed in front of the enormous drums on which the steel cables wound. Dunford assisted his wife into the third car, and bade her sit down on the dust covered bottom. He crouched beside her. Strachey climbed in, and righted the oil flares on their caps.

A bell clanged; the cars began to move downward.

Less than a foot above their heads the heavy timbers and bare rock of the slope

tunnel rushed by as the cars clanged and jerked their way into the depths. As the pitch of the vein ran steep, the cars shot down almost perpendicularly, and Mrs. Dunford braced herself against the sides, a vague terror at the heart, a sense of fear and gloom crushing her spirits. Only once before had she descended into a coal mine. She was but seventeen then; it was at Kennesbarre, in company with one she had known and cherished then—one who long ago had made his last descent into the earth. Her memories delved backward into the past, as she sat beside her elderly, cold hearted husband. At last the cars slowed down and came heavily to rest at the bottom of the slope.

"The thirteen-hundred-foot level," called out the breaker boss.

They stood in a lateral gangway between the transverse rails on which a draw of loaded cars had just been brought to the slope by a blind mule. The blank, stony eyeballs of the animal shone spectral in the ruddy, uncertain light.

"The thirteen hundred foot level?" repeated Lawrence Dunford. "She goes deeper than that?"

"Only in the abandoned workings, Sir," answered the old man, "in the 'robbed' workings to the north. Those run to fifteen hundred feet."

A tall, bearded man stood near the tracks, erect and motionless. The light in his cap threw deep shadows upon his features, which, powdered to a dusky tinge by the coal dust, had almost the semblance of a black mask.

"Henry, these are the visitors," said Joel Strachey. "Show the gentleman whatever he wishes to see—he has an order from the directors."

"All right, Joel," replied the fire boss.

It was Henry Mavis who, because of his liberal, self acquired education, his superior manners and good English, was always chosen to guide visitors through the great colliery. Yet by habit he spoke little, and always in a subdued, monotonous tone acquired in the silence of the coal pits. His large and pensive eyes glanced indifferently at the man and woman; he bowed, then led them along the gangway. Between the side timbers sat men and youths in the darkness, silent, or speaking in low tones as the visitors passed. Some smoked pipes.

"Smoking in mines is dangerous," said Dunford. "I'd not permit it myself."

"Our big up-cast fans keep the air sweet and fresh," answered the fire boss, "and, though this was once a fiery, gassy mine, we've had no trouble from that source for years."

"I observe that all your lights are naked," said Dunford.

"Quite safe, Sir. In case of fire, we could flood the lower levels in a few minutes."

BY the light of his own lamp, Dunford made a note in a little book with a gold pencil. Mrs. Dunford spoke no word—the weird scenes, as well as her thoughts, oppressed her and denied all speech. She stumbled along as in a dream, gazing with vague eyes upon all. It was as if she were buried alive with him forever and forever. The little flames burning on their caps—were not these like the feeble flickering and smoky fires of their own lives? How much smoke there was always mingled with the flame! If the torch of life might burn clear, with a light pure and white, radiant as—

"Madam, permit me to give you this piece of spar. Not everything in a coal mine is black," said the stately fire boss gravely, as he handed Mrs. Dunford a morsel of rough, milk white rock studded with sparkling, pointed crystals. Something in his voice startled her; her eyes, half hidden beneath her cap and the large veil, sought his own in the uncertain gloom. She took the crystals and thanked him. Now and again he offered her his strong hand to help her over dark and boggy places. The air roared and pulled behind them as the ventilating doors were opened. They traversed tunnel after tunnel. In passing a group of miners, Mavis remarked to the foreman that they would pass at once to the higher levels after the visitors had seen this one. Finally they encountered no more teams, no miners. These headings were not worked at present, the fire boss told them. A full half-mile now separated them from the nearest workers.

"There is danger here only when blasting is done," said the fire boss in a low voice. "The shale is very loose. Sometimes it falls, and the men are buried alive. Sometimes we get them out in time,—or parts of them by quick surgery,—quick and crude." Mrs. Dunford shuddered.

"Buried alive!" she exclaimed. "Oh! Once—"

"Come!" said her husband roughly.

The bearded, black faced fire boss pointed out the close timbering in this passage. "There are bands of slate and sulphur here," he explained, "that cause us heaps of trouble."

"Timbers here 'skin to skin,'" said Dunford, as he again drew forth his notebook; "strata of slate and sulphur."

Henry Mavis flung a glance of respectful curiosity toward this well informed stranger; but said nothing.

They walked to the end of the wide and Stygian driftway. Here there was an opening tightly boarded up.

"This," said Mavis, "leads up and then down to the old abandoned workings on the fifteen-hundred-foot level."

"I'd like to inspect those levels," said the mine speculator.

"No visitors are permitted there," was the miner's reply; "this brattice cuts off all access."

"I have full permission from the owners to see all parts of this mine," said Dunford arrogantly. "It is necessary that I see this part too. The brattice can be removed."

MAVIS made no reply; but his face grew stern. Then he recalled the words of old Strachey, "Show the gentleman whatever he wishes to see—he has an order from the directors." He hesitated a moment, then remarked, "Very well—wait here. I will fetch an ax."

When he had gone, silence lay between husband and wife. For a moment their