

THE LIFE OF A COAL MINER

THE SLOW PROGRESS OF THE BOY WHO STARTS IN A
BREAKER, AND ENDS, AN OLD MAN IN THE BREAKER
— AS TOLD BY A MAN WHO WAS ONCE A MINER

BY

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“I ’M twelve years old, goin’ on thirteen,” said the boy to the boss of the breaker. He didn’t look more than ten, and he was only nine, but the law said he must be twelve to get a job. He was one of a multitude of the 16,000 youngsters of the mines, who, because miners’ families are large and their pay comparatively small, start in the breaker before many boys have passed their primary schooling. From the time he enters the breaker there is a rule of progress that is almost always followed. Once a miner and twice a breaker-boy, the upward growth of boy to man, breaker-boy to miner, the descent from manhood to old age, from miner to breaker-boy: that is the rule. So the nine-year-old boy who is “twelve, goin’ on thirteen,” starts in the breaker. He gets from fifty to seventy cents for ten hours’ work. He rises at 5:30 o’clock in the morning, puts on his working clothes, always soaked with dust, eats his breakfast, and by seven o’clock he has climbed the dark and dusty stairway to the screen-room where he works. He sits on a hard bench built across a long chute through which passes a steady stream of broken coal. From the coal he must pick the pieces of slate or rock.

It is not a hard life but it is confining and

irksome. Sitting on his uncomfortable seat, bending constantly over the passing stream of coal, his hands soon become cut and scarred by the sharp pieces of slate and coal, while his finger nails are soon worn to the quick from contact with the iron chute. The air he breathes is saturated with the coal dust, and as a rule the breaker is fiercely hot in summer and intensely cold in winter. In many of the modern breakers, to be sure, steam heating pipes have been introduced into the screen-rooms, and fans have been placed in some breakers to carry away the dust. But however favorable the conditions, the boy’s life is a hard one. Yet it is a consistent introduction to what is to follow.

The ambition of every breaker-boy is to enter the mines, and at the first opportunity he begins there as a door-boy,—never over fourteen years of age and often under. The work of the door-boy is not so laborious as that in the breaker, but is more monotonous. He must be on hand when the first trip of cars enter in the morning and remain until the last comes out at night. His duty is to open and shut the door as men and cars pass through the door, which controls and regulates the ventilation of the mine. He is alone

in the darkness and silence all day, save when other men and boys pass through his door. Not many of these boys care to read, and if they did it would be impossible in the dim light of their small lamp. Whittling and whistling are the boy's chief recreations. The door-boy's wages vary from sixty-five to seventy-five cents a day, and from this he provides his own lamp, cotton and oil.

Just as the breaker-boy wants to be a door-boy, the door-boy wants to be a driver. When the mules are kept in the mines, as they usually are, the driver-boy must go down the shaft in time to clean and harness his mule, bring him to the foot of the shaft and hitch him to a trip of empty cars before seven o'clock. This trip of cars varies from four to seven according to the number of miners. The driver takes the empty cars to the working places and returns them loaded to the foot of the shaft. They are then hoisted to the surface and conveyed to the breaker where the coal is cracked, sorted and cleaned and made ready for the market. There are today ten thousand drivers in the anthracite coal mines. These boys are in constant danger, not only of falling roof and exploding gas, but of being crushed by the cars. Their pay varies from \$1.10 to \$1.25, from which sum they supply their own lamps, cotton and oil.

When the driver reaches the age of twenty he becomes either a runner or a laborer in the mines, more frequently the latter. The runner is a conductor who collects the loaded cars and directs the driver. The laborer is employed by the miner, subject to the approval of the superintendent, to load the cars with the coal which has been blasted by the miner. As a rule he is paid so much per car, and a definite number of cars constitute a day's work—the number varying in different mines—averaging from five to seven, equaling from twelve to fifteen tons of coal. The laborer's work is often made difficult by the water and rock which are found in large quantities in coal veins.

There are 24,000 laborers in the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania, each one of whom is looking forward to becoming a miner in the technical sense of the word—that is, the employer of a laborer. To do this a laborer must have had two years' experience in practical mining and be able to pass an examination before the district board. If he passes

he becomes a contractor as well as a laborer. He enters into a contract with the company to do a certain work at so much per car or yard. He blasts all the coal, and this involves judgment in locating the hole, skill in boring it, and care in preparing and determining the size of the shot. The number of blasts per day ranges from four to twelve, according to the size and character of the vein. He is responsible for the propping necessary to sustain the roof. According to the law of the State of Pennsylvania, the company operating the mine is obliged to furnish the miner the needed props, but the miner must place them at such places as the mine boss designates. Most of the boring is now done with hand-machines. The miner furnishes his own tools and supplies. His powder, squibs, paper, soap and oil he is compelled to buy from the company which employs him. His equipment includes the following tools—a hand-machine for drilling, drill, scraper, needle, blasting barrel, crowbar, pick, shovel, hammer, sledge, cartridge pin, oil can, toolbox and lamp. As a rule he rises at five A. M.; he enters the mine shortly after six. In some cases he is obliged to walk a mile or more underground to reach his place of work. He spends from eight to ten hours in the mine. Taking three hundred days as the possible working time in a year, the anthracite miner's daily pay for the past twenty years will not average over \$1.60 a day, and that of the laborer not over \$1.35.

His dangers are many. He may be crushed to death at any time by the falling roof, burned to death by the exploding of gas, or blown to pieces by a premature blast. So dangerous is his work that he is debarred from all ordinary life insurance. In no part of the country will you find so many crippled boys and broken-down men. During the last thirty years over 10,000 men and boys have been killed and 25,000 have been injured in this industry. Not many old men are found in the mines. The average age of those killed is 32.13.

It is an endless routine of dull plodding work from nine years until death—a sort of voluntary life imprisonment. Few escape. Once they begin, they continue to live out their commonplace, low-leveled existence, ignoring their daily danger, knowing nothing better.