

The Storyteller

GOOD FOR EVIL.

Three sharp, piercing blasts came from the whistle of the shaft-house and reverberated through the silent, snow-covered valley. It was an inky-dark night, cold with a biting keenness, and few of the miners had left their cabins and their comparatively comfortable fire sides. But even while the whistle was still sounding its hoarse warning, lights glimmered in the neighborhood of the black building, that covered the shaft, excited men with lanterns moved here and there shouting to each other, and out in the village the light from many an open door made ruddy patches on the snow. A few minutes later, and black groups of people, some bearing blazing mine lamps on their hats, swarmed up the steep hill toward the scene of the disturbance. In a little while after the warning had sounded a crowd of several hundred men and women had gathered outside of the shaft-house, curious, excited, all asking questions, and no one being able to reply.

The one man who knew the cause of the warning was Jikins, the mine foreman. He stood in the little office building near the fan-house, with his ear glued to the telephone receiver, pale as a ghost, his hair dishevelled, and his black eyes gleaming with suppressed excitement.

'Hello!' he said, 'Give me J. C. Coughlan, of the Coughlan Coal Company. For God's sake hurry! Hello! Is that Mr. Coughlan? This is Jikins! There has been an accident at the mine. Fans were running only half-speed on account of strike. Harry, your son, came over this afternoon and went down this evening without my knowledge. Some of the chambers had gas in them, and—well, there was an explosion and the inside of the shaft is on fire. Hello! Yes, sir! We will do our best; have courage! Good-bye.' He almost threw the receiver into its receptacle and dashed from the room. There was work for him to do. Meanwhile the crowd outside had grown to a mob of several hundred people. At intervals vast volumes of pungent smoke shot up from the mouth of the pit, acrid and irritating with the odor of oil-soaked wood. Willing hands manned the huge hose which was brought out to flush the shaft, and a dozen sturdy arms pointed it down the black cavity. There was a babel of shouted suggestions as to what should be done; the crowd packed closer and closer around the shaft building, and all seemed confusion. Suddenly out of the tumult rose a clear, shrill voice.

'Men, we must have order here! Push the crowd back, you in front, we must have room to work, and we must have silence. Let me give the orders. Now, everybody: bring around that other hose! There, that's it! Now down with it! Good!

It was Jikins, the superintendent. His pale, steadfast face and commanding voice seemed to exercise a remarkable influence over the crowd. The men worked with a new energy; out of confusion came order. Gradually the smoke became less dense, and Jikins, noting every change, at last gave the signal to have the water shut off. The fire had been extinguished.

At almost the same moment a commotion arose in the rear of the crowd. A carriage drawn by a pair of steaming horses drove up, and a man and a woman alighted. Instinctively the people pressed back and made way for them.

'It's Coughlan and his wife!' was whispered from mouth to mouth. Formerly they had been accustomed to mention Coughlan's name only with execration—Coughlan, the man who had forced them time and again to remain idle in order that coal prices might not fall from over-production, Coughlan, the man whose satrap-bosses had practically made slaves of them. His wife—they knew little concerning her; that she was Coughlan's wife was sufficient.

Jikins met the mine owner and his wife in front of the shaft-house: a hurried colloquy ensued.

'There is hope,' said the superintendent: but some one must go down the shaft immediately. The smoke renders the attempt very dangerous, but we may get volunteers. My lungs won't stand it, or I'd go myself. We need a strong man and a true man.'

The flabby face of the mine-owner was crimson with excitement and nervous tension. His wife was softly weeping on his shoulder, and looked up as the superintendent ceased speaking.

'Thank you, Jikins,' she said. 'We need—O God how we need a friend now—strong and true. James, can we ask these people to make such a sacrifice for us?'

Coughlan bowed his head. 'Don't!' he whispered. 'Don't talk that way now! Be brave. I'll offer a reward; we'll find a way!' The woman began to sob aloud, and clung to him more closely.

In the meantime somebody had lighted a bundle of oil-soaked cotton waste, placed in the fork of a near-by tree. As it blazed up the red glare, reflected by the snow, threw into relief the eager faces of the crowd, pressing now in increased numbers around the shaft-house, and the anxious little group in the centre of the circle. Behind showed the mountain, bleak and desolate, covered with blackened tree-stumps, with here and there a straggly pine standing in dismal misery all alone. Around the radius of the circle the powdery snow glittered like a shower of diamond dust.

Coughlan, as if nerved with a new determination, released his wife's hands from his neck, placed an arm around her waist, and, facing the assemblage, raised his hand to command silence.

'Men,' he said, in a voice trembling with emotion, 'my son is down in that burning shaft, and some one must brave danger to find him and to rescue him. We hope that he is alive; but alive or dead, I am determined to help him. He is my only son, and he is dear to me. So listen now. I am an old man, and I call on you to do, not an act of justice but an act of heroism. I myself will go down the shaft to find my son; I ask only for one volunteer to accompany me. Who will be my companion? He will be rewarded!'

The crowd was silent for a moment. Then several men attempted to go forward. There were many brave hearts there, but their wives or their sweethearts pulled them back. Why should they give their lives to this man? They were as dear to their kindred as his son was to him. They were sorry indeed, but they had given him everything else; why should he now demand their lives?

'Is there no one to volunteer?' cried Jikins, searching the faces of the crowd. Then, men—' He paused. A burly, bewhiskered giant, wearing a red flannel shirt, open at the collar to display his brawny, hairy chest, was pressing to the front. His slouch hat was pulled far over his forehead, and his eyes glared from under his bushy brows with a gleam like a mad bear's. He reached the centre of the group, and for a moment confronted the mine-owner in silence.

'The Anarchist!' the crowd exclaimed in wonder. During the past two weeks of idleness the man had been given this title, however unmerited, on account of his fiery speeches against capital. He was counted one of the most desperate men, and the hardest drinker in town. Whether his nationality was German, Polish, or Slavonic no one could tell—he spoke all these languages indifferently well; but that he was a fanatic, with all the fanatic's love of admiration, was admitted by all.

His lanky frame towered over the stooped figure of the mine-owner, and there was an exultant ring in his voice when he began to speak.

'Master Coughlan,' he said, 'you haf coom to beg of the beggars, you haf asked us to go to maybe death to save your son. One little week ago we come to you; we ask you for work. You say to us when we come, what you cannot afford to let us work. You tell us that, remember—and you heard him, my people—you cannot afford to keep the starve away from us. Hah!' There was biting sarcasm in the man's tones, and the mine-owner was infuriated. He glared at his accuser, and attempted to step forward, but the 'Anarchist' made a warning gesture with one hand, and with the other pointed toward the shaft.

'You can talk later; now it is our time! Master Coughlan, you haf asked us to keep your son from death—you who would not risk the price of a loaf of bread to keep us alive! And what do we answer? Listen, then!' He paused for a brief instant. What do we say to you, the heartless man? We say 'Yes!' We say we will help you; not because you are rich, or because of money, but to show you that riches haf not the power to buy courage or friends. We say no man is rich or poor in the bresence of death, and so we say. 'Here is Alex. Birchhoff—a poor man, an ignorant man—and he will go down in the mine and face death for you—alone—all alone! You shall not go; you are too old. Have I spoken well, my people?'

There was a cheer from the crowd, and the orator's eyes glistened with pleasure. The mine-owner, forgetful of all save that his son was to be rescued, tried to grasp Birchhoff's hand.

'I will pay you well!' he repeated over and over again.

Birchhoff seemed not to notice him. Don't bother me now,' he said. 'We will talk if I come back. Good-bye, friends!' he cried, and he stepped on the carriage ready to be lowered five hundred feet into the earth. His clothes were wetted and a damp sponge was placed over his nose. Then the bell clanked, and the carriage sank down suddenly, and noiselessly, into the tomb-like darkness.

Then ensued tense moments of waiting that seemed hours. Suddenly the bell again clanked, the signal to hoist. The cable became taut, and there was a buzz of conversation, followed by a strange silence. Somewhere