

APPALLING COLLIERY ACCIDENT.—DEATH OF TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN PERSONS.

WHILE all cheerful English households have been adding to their cheerfulness by heaping up the fires that make a pleasant contrast to the cold outside, a terrible tragedy has occurred in one of the great northern coal-fields. At 10 o'clock on the morning of Thursday, January 16, more than 200 men and boys were buried alive in the heart of the earth; 70 fathoms below the surface of the soil. The scene of this most horrible event, the Hexter or Hartley New Pit, lies a little to the west of the Blyth and Tyne junction, on the coast of Northumberland. The pit is so near to the coast that from the flooding to which it is liable it was feared that the sea had been "struck; and to overcome this difficulty an unusual force of pumping machinery was employed. This machinery was of course, erected at the mouth of the shaft, and the entrance and the extensive works below. The shaft itself is of large dimensions—12 feet in diameter, and it was secured from top to bottom by wood-work called "brattice." About 84 fathoms from the top is the entrance to the uppermost seam or gallery, known as the high main. Nearly 40 fathoms lower a second gallery, called the yard seam, is entered. Still lower, at the immense depth of 100 fathoms from the mouth of the shaft, is yet another seam, the only one which is liable to inundation. An air shaft which had been sunk from the middle to the lowermost seam was capable of containing a ladder, and therefore afforded a temporary means of bodily communication between the second and third seams.

On the day and at the hour named there were no less than 215 men and lads down in the lowest of the seams, and there were five men in the shaft; strong healthy fellows, the bone and sinew, the prop and stay, of the villages around. There was no negligence, for in work so perilous as this, where the lives of all hang upon the lightest action, no one trifles. No precaution had been omitted. The whole machinery went steadily. The hive below was working in security. No one, we may be sure, thought of danger from the massive iron beam which stretched across the pit, and raised to the surface the subterranean water. But suddenly one of those mysterious actions which will sometimes take place in metals, which cause a watchspring to snap, in a frosty night, or an axle-tree to break like glass without any appreciable cause, operated upon that great beam. There is no proof that it was faulty, yet it parted, and in a moment a mass of forty tons was buried

down the shaft, gathering force and velocity as it fell, sweeping away the stages, the props, and the lining of the shaft, crushing the five men who were coming to the surface, and carrying all down with it in a mass of ruin to the bottom. The timber and planking which lined the pit being torn away, the sides in many places collapsed, and what had been a safe, open passage, was the next moment densely choked for many hundred feet deep. And the 215 men and boys were in the passages below, cut off from all communication with the upper world, while the water was fast pouring into those passages,—pouring 1500 gallons per minute.

The agony and terror ~~tabbed~~ throughout the neighbourhood as the nature of the catastrophe became known, cannot be described. Little relief of feeling—scant gleams of hope or consolation—were to be had from the report of the brave adventurers who went down, when the suffocating dust had a little subsided. Nearly half the depth of the shaft was found to be choked up. As only half-a-dozen men could work at a time in the arduous task of removing the stones, timber, and earth, it seemed from the first but too probable that a considerable time must needs be consumed in getting to the bottom. If the imprisoned had failed, from any reason, to reach the middle seam, through the air staple, their rescue, it was well known, would be hopeless. They would perish of suffocation, hunger, or drowning, before help could arrive. But in the event of their having passed up the ladder before overtaken by foul air or inundation, it would still clearly take many hours to open for them a way of escape.

Nevertheless, the rescue of the men could not be regarded as wholly impracticable. From Thursday the 16th till Wednesday the 22nd sinkers were employed night and day to clear a passage. Faint glimpses of hope were afforded during the first four days by signs of life which proceeded from the mine, but these signs died away at last. When on the 22nd all difficulties had been overcome, and an entrance effected, not a living man remained of those who went down full of life and strength on the 16th. Even after the opening of the shaft had in a measure purified the air below, those who first volunteered to go down and ascertain the appalling truth were with difficulty able to go through their task, so severely were they affected by the gas which had accumulated. When two of the principal persons connected with the colliery made a tour of the works below, they met everywhere dead bodies, even in their death telling a tale of devotion

that is most affecting. "Families are lying in groups; children in the arms of their fathers; brothers with brothers." Of some little consolation is the assurance that "most of them looked placid, as if asleep," apparently denoting that the more horrible details of a death by starvation had been avoided by the more certain, swift, and merciful deprivation of life through the foulness of the atmosphere. But while this was the case of the great majority, there were exceptions, for we are told that "higher up, near the furnace, some tall stout men seem to have died hard." Their strength apparently but served to prolong their agony. They seem to have been spared the horrors of a death by starvation. For although the corn-bins filled for the use of the horses employed in the mine were cleared out, corn was found in the pockets of some of the men, and a pony which it was hoped would furnish food enough to help to maintain the buried men for some days, was not touched, having been found dead from the same cause as the men. The last noise—the "jowling"—from within was heard on Sunday, the 19th, and as this, in all likelihood, proceeded from the tall stout men up near the furnace, who died the hardest, the probability is that the rest were mercifully released from their sufferings before that time.

While the operations of the disentanglers were going forward, what must have been the feelings of the agonised relatives and friends who crowded day and night about the mouth of the pit? It would be impossible to conceive a more harrowing spectacle than that presented during the past week at the Hartley coal-fields. Wives, mothers, and children exposed to the most inclement weather this winter has as yet brought, counting the weary hours, and as day lapsed into day, despairingly clinging to the vain hope that all might yet be well.

The English public already recognises two duties with reference to this terrible event. The first is, to do what can be done to alleviate the misery of the unhappy families whom it affects, and the next is, to see, as far as possible, that the like does not occur again. Foremost with her sympathy, has been her Majesty the Queen, who, even in the death of her own

quest will inform us fully of the efficiency of the apparatus for the protection of life in the Hartley Colliery Works. As far as we are informed at present, there is no ground for condemnation as regards the presence of the ordinary safeguards and precautions. But on one point a hint has been given which we hope to see bear practical fruit. It is observed that every coal mine should have two shafts, so that if one becomes choked up from any cause, the other would still be available for the protection of life. We learn that until lately no access from any one of the three seams in the Hartley pit into another existed, except through the great shaft. Not long ago, upon the representation of the Government inspector, the air staple, of which mention has been made above, was sunk between the middle or yard seam and the lowest working; and it was by this passage that the unfortunate victims escaped upwards from the rising water. Why was not an air staple also sunk from the top seam, or high main, to the yard seam? If such a passage had existed the men could have escaped into that portion of the shaft which was above the debris, and free to the pit mouth.