

## DESCRIPTION OF WILLIAM PIT.

(From Daniell's Voyages.)

We fixed ourselves in the basket, standing with our hands grasping the chain, the word was given, and down we glided with a smooth and scarcely perceptible motion through a duct about six feet in diameter, and wooded all round. I kept my eyes fixed on the aperture above, which contracted as I fell, till at a vast depth I was obliged to look down as my head grew dizzy, and small pieces of coal and drops of water struck with unpleasant force against my face. As we descended lower all became darkness, noise over our heads grew gradually more indistinct, till it died away, and a dreary silence ensued, broken only occasionally by the grating of the basket against the walls. At length, after a descent of five hundred and seventy-six feet, I heard the voices of men below me, and presently perceived two dim lights. These were at the High Eye, formerly at the bottom of the shaft, on a level with which is a great extent of workings. I asked no questions here—"steady the basket," cried our guide, and in a moment we were again in utter darkness. In a quarter of a minute more I heard other voices below me—the basket stopped and we soon found ourselves on our feet at the bottom of six hundred and thirty feet from the light.

I could here distinguish nothing but a single candle, with the obscure form of a man by it—all around was pitch dark, not a ray of light reaching the bottom from the mouth of the shaft. Before we proceeded to explore the mine, we were recommended to remain quiet a little in order to collect ourselves, and while we were thus striving to be composed, my nerves were momentarily shocked by a combination and succession of strange noises, among which the loud clank of the chain as the empty basket dashed to the ground, was particularly offensive. I never saw the object, and had no notice of its approach, till its infernal crash always came to make me jump out of myself.

While we were conversing here on the possible accidents that might occur in ascending or descending in the basket, we were told of a poor woman who lately had an extraordinary escape. It was her business to attach the chain of the bucket, and while she was doing this her hand became somehow entangled, and the man at the engine setting it in motion before the proper time, she was pulled from the ground before she could extricate herself, and dragged up as she hung by one arm, to the top of the pit, with no injury but a slight laceration of her hand.

I had not become quite reconciled to the clank when we were summoned to go on. From the foot of the shaft we proceeded through a very long passage cut through rock with the roof arched, and the sides faced with bricks and whitewashed. All the rock passages through the mine are faced with bricks in a similar manner, an enormously expensive precaution, but absolutely necessary to prevent the falling down of loose fragments of stone. I cannot describe scientifically, or with any degree of clearness and certainty, all the methods of proceeding that have been adopted in laying out these vast subterranean works, and indeed such an account is scarcely called for, as the mine no doubt very much resembles in its general plan many others that have often been described. In its present state as far as I could ascertain as I groped my way through the darkness, it appeared in the meeting and passing of its numerous passages, to resemble the streets of a city—and of a city of no mean extent, for we sometimes walked for nearly half a mile without turning, between walls of coal or rock. To the right and left of the long lanes are workings, hollow spaces, five yards wide and twenty deep, left for the support of the roof, so that only one third of a bed of coal is taken away. Mr Pennant observed, that these columns appeared to him to be stores for future fuel, but they are left standing merely from necessity, and no material portion of them could be removed without danger to the great superstructure which they tend to uphold.

The coals are dragged from the workings in baskets, one at a time, by horses, and carried to a place of general rendezvous, where by means of a crane they are placed on to the trains, nine of which, bearing a burthen of upwards of six tons, are drawn by a single horse to the shaft. A tram is a square board supported by four very low wheels, and a horse drags nine of them with their full cargo along an iron railway without any apparent effort.

The ventilation of the mine in its remotest corners is said to be as perfect as is necessary, though I confess that in some places I felt no little difficulty in breathing. The air is rarefied by heat from a large fire kept constantly burning, and the current directed to the various workings through conduits formed by boarded partitions placed about a foot distant from the walls. Doors are placed at intervals in the long passages which stop the air in its course and force it through the conduits in the workings to the right or left.

The sensations excited in me as I was descending down the pit did not readily subside, and I wandered about the mine with my mind very much upon the alert, and under an indistinct apprehension of some possible danger which gave intensity to my interest in every thing that I heard or saw. A dreariness pervaded the place which struck upon the heart—one felt as if beyond the bounds allotted to man or any living being, and transported to some hideous region unblest by every charm that cheers the habitable world. We traced our way through passage after passage in the blackest darkness, sometimes rendered more awful by a death-like silence, which was now and then broken by the banging of some distant door, or an explosion of gunpowder, that pealed with a loud and long report through the unseen recesses of the mine, and gave us some idea of its vast extent. Occasionally a light appeared in the distance before us, which did not dispel the darkness so as to discover by whom it was borne, but advanced like a meteor through the gloom, accompanied by a loud rumbling noise, the cause of which was not explained to the eye till we were called upon to make way for a horse, which passed by with its long line of baskets, and driven by a young girl covered with filth.

Our guide now led us to a passage where, in a small stream of water that flowed through it, we heard some air bubbling up, which we knew to be hydrogen: he applied a candle to it, when it instantly took fire, burning with a clear blueish light, in a flame not larger than that from a small lamp. It continued visible when we had receded to a considerable distance from it, and had a very beautiful appearance, shining like a brilliant star in the darkness, and giving an effect of exceeding depth to the gloomy avenue before us. While we were gazing at it, with the profoundest stillness around us, we were startled by a report as loud as a clap of thunder, proceeding from an explosion of gunpowder. On going to the spot from whence it came, we found some men working a passage through a bed of rocks, called in the language of miners, a *fault*, a phenomenon too familiar in coal mines to require any comment from me. This part of the mine was very remote from the shaft, and so imperfectly ventilated, that the heat and stench in it were scarcely supportable.

Not far from this place our guide regarded me with a very big and significant look, and produced all the effect he intended on my mind, when he informed me that I was walking under the sea, and had probably ships sailing over head. Considering this as the most extraordinary situation that we had been in during our subterranean excursion, he pulled out a bottle of spirits from his pocket and drank our healths and a safe return to us, with all due solemnity. This rite fulfilled, we turned our steps towards the shaft, oppressed by the heat and foulness of the air, and anxious again to see the day. We had walked about four miles, in various directions, but had not explored half the mine, even in its lower part, and had a labyrinth of excavations over our heads as numerous and as extensive as those through which we had been rambling, and separated from them by a roof of only nine fathoms thick. I was astonished to hear that the whole of this immense work was the labour of scarcely ten years; that the extensive space through which we had passed, and the whole mine that we had left unexplored, were within this short period a solid body of coal and rock. The labour going on before our eyes appeared quite insignificant, and imagination could scarcely conceive the formation by such means of this vast place, which struck one as some strange creation by the giant hands of nature.

We ascended to the higher works by a very steep path, which, at an elevation of about sixty feet from the lower level, opens into the shaft. The miners figuratively call the shaft the eye of the mine, and this inlet into the upper excavations is denominated the High Eye. It was here that our guide had given his warning of "steady the basket," lest it struck against the landing in its descent. All the coals procured from under-workings were formerly dragged up to the point by horses, but the task was found so difficult and tedious that it was thought expedient to sink the shaft to its present level. From the edge of the landing place at the High Eye, I had a peep at the day through the opening which appeared at a dreadful height above my head, and contracted to a spot not bigger than the palm of my hand.

As we were not promised the sight of any novelty in the upper mine, we did not enter it, but returned to the lower one, from whence we proceeded to the shaft of the James mine, through a long up-cast passage, which, in consequence of a late accident, exhibits one of the most awful spectacles that can be conceived. An unusual quantity of coals were taken from it, and it was thought necessary, for the support of the roof, to plant two rows of posts under it, which were composed of the trunks of the largest oaks that could be procured. They had not been fixed long when the roof began to sink, descending very slowly, but with irresistible force, and bending or breaking every tree that stood beneath it. It did not sink much more than a foot, and people now pass fearlessly under it, in the conviction that it has permanently settled. The passage, however, bears a very tremendous appearance, and I did not go through it without some agitation. The broken and splintered trees remain, and are such formidable mementos of the insecurity of the roof, that I voluntarily quickened my pace as I looked at them, lest I should again hear the coals cracking over my head. This part of our expedition was rendered exceedingly disagreeable by a sulphureous stream of water which flowed down the shaft, casting forth an odour which touched even the nose of our guide. At the top of the passage are the stables belonging to the two mines, in which forty horses are kept, which never see the light.

