

CHAPTER XIII.

DIAMOND MINE DISASTER, BRAIDWOOD, ILL.

ONE of the most disastrous events in the history of the coal trade of the West was that of the Diamond Mine, Braidwood, Illinois, on February 16th, 1883, whereby sixty-nine men lost their lives, leaving thirty-nine widows and ninety-three fatherless children to mourn their loss.

The topography of the county (Will) in which the Diamond mine was located is known to be in general very level and low. The seam of coal is thin, and near the surface, and one of the chief sources of expense in mining it is the handling of the great quantities of water which continually accumulate in the workings.

There is said to be ten square miles of this level and marshy tract upon which the Diamond and other mines are located, and it is so flat that no natural drainage is locally possible, and ordinarily all accumulations of water lie upon the surface until absorbed or evaporated. Even when thrown from the mine with pumps it has no alternative but to find its way through the soil back again. Another feature of the situation is that all the coal in this field is worked on the long-wall system, and as fast as the mineral is removed the surface comes down with the roof, and consequently makes a loose, irregular break along the surface of the workings, particularly suscep-

tible to the action of water, and leaves in general an uneven and treacherous surface for water to stand upon.

For several days prior to the 16th of Feb., 1883, there had been a general thaw in the vicinity of Braidwood, accompanied by warm rains, which reduced the winter snow to water and swelled, it to a flood, which overspread the entire surrounding country. That this was not an unusual condition of things is not claimed. Water in similar quantities had accumulated and stood upon the surface there before. On several occasions in former years, surface water had found its way into the mine, and two years previously it had broken through in such quantities as to create general alarm. In this case it is stated only that the volume of water was not greater than usual. Its depth was given as from one to three feet, but whether it was or not does not effect the gravity of the situation. It was spread like a sea on the entire surface of the country and constituted an open menace to every mine in the vicinity. That it was regarded as an element of danger was shown by the action of the superintendent of an adjacent mine, who prohibited the men from going into his works and ordered those out who had gone down before his arrival. Yet the men of the Diamond mine went below that morning, as usual, and with only fifty-four feet of sand and surface drift between them and an untold weight of water, began the day's work which they never finished.

At about eleven o'clock in the morning the "Cager" at the bottom of the main shaft discovered an unusual amount flowing to the bottom, and sent word to that effect to the men at the different working places,

by the drivers who came to the shaft with their loaded cars. Being still uneasy about it he came to the top to ascertain if possible the cause of it. Making no discoveries he descended the shaft again, and on reaching the bottom found the volume of water already so great that he had difficulty in rescuing a boy, who had charge of a door near the shaft, with whom he once ascended again to the top. By this time those who had taken the alarm were now clambering out of the escapement shaft, and the mine was now filling so rapidly that those who failed to receive the alarm, or were at too great a distance from the shaft, were speedily and hopelessly shut off from all escape whatever.

In this, as in other mines generally, the main shaft was located in the dip, or lowest point of the coal, so that all water which accumulated in the mine could flow to the shaft, and then be raised with pumps to the surface. The depth of the old shaft near the break was sixty-eight feet, that of the main shaft eighty-four feet, and that of the escapement shaft seventy-five feet. The first rush of water was consequently to the bottom of the main shaft, that being the lowest point, and all escape at that point would be shut off some time before the outer galleries were filled. It is probable, therefore, that no water would reach the working places until it was really too late to make any escape except by the escapement shaft. The bottom of this shaft being about nine feet higher than that of the main shaft, it would afford an opportunity for egress after it was no longer possible to reach the bottom of the main shaft.

To this point those who did escape made their way, and at this point the last desperate struggle of those who barely escaped was made, and, groping for this in despair having almost reached it, twenty-two men waited and accepted their doom.

Unhappily there was a fatal defect in the construction of the roadway leading to this escapement shaft, which proved full of fatal consequences. At a short distance from the bottom of this shaft there was a dip or declivity in the roadway, followed by a corresponding rise and creating a hollow about fifteen yards in length. Of course this hollow would be filled with water to the roof, while the road on either side of it was still out of water, and thus the advantage of the higher ground at either end would be neutralized and lost. It will be seen by the statements made hereafter by those who escaped last by this route, that they had to dive or plunge through this fifteen yards of water in order to be able to reach the bottom of the escapement shaft.

Another complication arises in all such cases as this, from the doors set across the roadway for the purpose of directing and controlling the currents of air. One of these doors being closed, with a weight of a body of water against it equal to its own dimensions would constitute a barrier as impassable as a wall of rock, and so, doubtless, many desperate men found it. Those who did escape had their most dreadful struggle with the door leading to the escapement gallery, and the location at which twenty-two others were found indicated that they may have had a similar struggle in vain. It will be thus seen that when this sea of surface water began its headlong

rush into the cavities of the Diamond mine, it first closed the exit by the main shaft, then by the escapement shaft, then hermetically sealed the doors and took possession of the more remote recesses at its own deadly leisure.

As soon as the nature and extent of the catastrophe could be realized on the surface, active measures were proposed and taken for the rescue of those yet within the mine. These were, however, as brief as they were futile. It was as difficult to get into the mine as it was to get out. The pit boss descended the main shaft, but found only water, and the black damp so heavy as to put out his light. Two men, however, succeeded in making an entry by the escapement shaft, but they never returned. Their bodies were afterwards found among the twenty-two victims near the bottom of the shaft, and their widows, children and friends can only lament their fruitless heroism.

This closed the chapter and completed the death roll. Having thus briefly sketched the circumstances attending this tragic event we now introduce the statements of some of those who participated in the scenes inside the mine during those few fateful moments in which the destinies of so many men were sealed.

The first is the statement of a young Swede who worked in the mine: "I was at work in the extreme southwest entry. The driver came running in and gave the alarm that the water had broken in. There were ten men at work there in five places. All of us quit work and hurried out towards the shaft, and met the water first at the west switch, and before

reaching the door leading to the escapement shaft we had to wade through three feet of water. Four of us came out together to that point, and found twelve or fifteen men there ahead of us. It took the united strength of as many as could get at the door to force it open against the pressure of the water.

"I was the last to go through, and the weight of the water pressed the door together, and caught my foot and jammed it very badly before I could get it away. After a struggle, I got loose, and followed the others. I found them at a point where the bottom dipped and made a hollow, between us and the escapement shaft. In this hollow the water was up to the roof and the distance through it was, I should think, about twelve or fifteen yards.

"Most of the men thought it was impossible to get through, but a man named Smith urged on us all to try. He said he would die if he stayed there, and he would rather die trying to get through. He went into the water and called me to come on. He seized me by the arm, and holding to each other we struggled on until we finally came through on the other end completely exhausted. After resting long enough to recover our breaths, we climbed the stairs and were safe."

The next statement is by a young Scotchman. He says:

"I was working at the face when the alarm was given by the drivers, and as I had been afraid of the water, I ran out with the others, without stopping for our clothes. I was not much acquainted with the roads, so I had to follow the others, trusting to their knowledge of the way. We had not gone far be-

fore we met the water. It seemed to swell before us. I heard some one shouting to others that they had gone the wrong way, and hurrying after them as if to bring them back, but I never saw them afterwards. When we got to the door leading to the escapement it took seven of us to get it open.

"The water was surging against it in great waves, and rising with every wave. When we had forced our way through the door we found about fifteen men in there ahead of us, and up to their chins in the water, and the dip ahead of them filled to the roof. Some were crying, some were praying, and all hopeless of getting any farther.

"Then Smith called out that it was death to stay there and he would die trying to get through. Six of us plunged after him into the watery tunnel. I got down on my hands and knees, and began to grope my way through in the dark, hurrying, and trying to hold my breath. Just as I thought I must be nearly through, I found my way obstructed by a fall of rock, against which I struck my head with such force as to be almost stunned, but I rallied again and made my way over it and then encountered two men struggling wildly in the passage. Fortunately I escaped their dying clutches, for another moment's delay would have been fatal to me.

"A few more struggles brought me suddenly to the end, and I emerged from the water close to the bottom of the shaft. The water ran from my nose and mouth for some time, but I soon recovered strength to go up the ladder, where I found my father and brother, both of whom had been at work in the mine, but had escaped before I did. They had about given me up. I

was the last to come through the water, and Smith was the last to climb the shaft."

The alarm was sounded by the engineer's whistle, and soon, crowds flocked from Braidwood, and the neighboring villages; men coming with all possible speed to render any necessary assistance in rescuing their friends and comrades. But it was of no avail, as they were past all earthly help in a short time; and the usual scenes of such disasters—weeping wives, and children pleading, praying, and crying for their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers, filled the eyes and swelled the hearts of those there to witness them.

The break was found near the end of the dump, and the water was boiling three feet above the surface as it went rushing into the break like a whirlpool, roaring so that it could be heard for a quarter of a mile away. It was found to be about fifty by ninety feet in dimension. Nothing could be done to get the water out of the shaft until a dam was built to stop its running in. To accomplish this required the building of a dam five thousand feet in length, in water three feet deep. Assistance in the way of labor was at hand, all the mines in the vicinity lying idle until every effort was made to secure the dead bodies of their fellow-workmen.

When the dam was built all the pumps available in the neighborhood were put in the shaft, and with two tanks on the cages, the combined output of water was two thousand five hundred and ninety gallons per minute. This powerful force was pushed to its utmost limit night and day until the 26th of March, thirty, eight days after the mine was flooded before any of the bodies were recovered.

Volunteer exploring parties were soon organized, and, led by men of nerve and experience, descended into the pit while it was still necessary to wade through water to make their search, and here is the experience of some of them. One says:

"Shortly after the water was down so that a search could be made, I became one of a party of explorers who undertook to go into the mine. We found the bottom of the shaft and the roadways in a terrible condition. The water had washed gravel, sand and rubbish into and across the shaft bottom to a depth of about four feet. Found the water running also about four feet deep in the roadway on east side. I made my way to the door which had stopped the men from reaching the main shaft, owing to the weight of water against it. Immediately behind the door lay the bodies of four men; two more lay near the stable, which was situated in the southwest corner of the bottom pillar, and before reaching the return airway, several others were discovered lying more or less under the fallen rock. We found the bodies of three brothers on the top of some framing timbers. They were arm-in-arm, the youngest, a lad of fifteen years, in the middle. He had a large stone lying on his head. There were twenty-two bodies in all recovered at this time, all in the space between the door and the roadway leading to the escapement shaft. They were all in such a state of decomposition that it was impossible to identify them except by their clothing. We advanced and tried to reach the escapement shaft, but found it impossible, as the water was still nearly up to the roof.

"In the other direction we advanced about two

hundred and fifty yards, until our progress was stopped by fallen rocks. We found no more bodies, however, and came out."

The following is the statement of another discreet and courageous explorer:

"In company with a number of others I went up to the Diamond shaft, when it was ready to be searched for bodies. We all went down and there found the bodies which had been discovered by the first exploring party, and while they were being taken to the surface, we went on in search of other victims of the flood. We found the roadways very badly caved in, and in a very dangerous condition. We had great difficulty in making our way over the falls, and this was materially increased by the bad condition of the air, which was so heavy we could hardly keep a light. To guard against danger from the gas, I kept some distance ahead of the party with a safety lamp, they following with naked lights. It required the efforts of the whole party in some places to make a passage-way at all, but after a great struggle we succeeded in reaching the main switch or parting, a distance of perhaps two hundred yards from the shaft and found we could proceed no farther, on account of a heavy fall. All that day was spent in trying to force our way by digging and crawling under and over the piles of rock, past this obstruction.

"The night shift came on and relieved us, and in the morning we again relieved them at this work, and continued the effort to get over the fall until four o'clock in the afternoon of the second day, when we finally reached the roadway on the other side.

Some distance farther on we came upon the bodies of two mules, but made no further discoveries. On the next day I made a further search in this entry, and reached the working face, though in some places wading in water waist deep, but no other bodies were found but those of the mules. The day following we went into the entry running south, until we were stopped by falls, which completely blocked up the entry; and as black-damp was too strong for a light to burn, we were compelled to abandon the effort in that direction.

“On Friday morning we got through into the main west entry, and after a very arduous effort we stopped to smoke and rest a bit; but while the others were resting, I went on a short distance, and there discovered six bodies, all on the top of the timbers. I went on a little farther to make sure there was no danger, and then called up my mates, and we then counted the bodies. Afterwards I pushed on, and by dint of hard creeping and tight squeezing, I reached the working face, but discovered nothing more.

“We then went out and reported to the superintendent, and decided to make some small sleds, on which to remove the bodies. While these were being made, men were vigorously at work on the roadways, cutting a passage-way sufficient to admit of the sleds and coffins. This was not accomplished until Sunday morning, about ten o'clock, and on Sunday afternoon the bodies finally reached the surface.”

After a thorough search of all accessible parts of the mine it became evident that the other forty-one victims of the flooded mine were buried beneath the ruins and beyond recovery, except at an enormous

expense and great risk of life, and further effort to recover them was abandoned. The company offered to keep up the work of pumping and afford all the necessary facilities, if men could be found to go on with the exploration below, but the improbability of any further satisfactory results deterred the men from taking any more risks. Consequently by general consent, though not without protest of those most deeply affected, some of whom wanted a shaft sunk about the face of the workings where the drowned men were supposed to be at work when overcome by the water, the long-sustained effort was at last suspended. The dead were identified and buried. The fires drawn from the furnaces, the pumps ceased, the shaft gradually filled again with water, and the late populous mine became simply the silent sepulcher of the unrecovered dead. And such it will ever remain. The property was abandoned, and will only be known in the future as the scene of the great tragedy.