

CHAPTER XVII.

NANTICOKE HORROR, AND OTHER ACCIDENTS—NANTICOKE HORROR.

VERY few more sad accidents have occurred in the annals of the coal regions of Pennsylvania than that which is now known as the "Nanticoke Horror," which happened on the 18th of December, 1885, and by which twenty-six human beings lost their lives by a rush of quicksand and water into the mine.

This is the most remarkable accident of the mining history of this country. This mine was considered one of the best planned and most reliable, and no one ever dreamed of such unexpected danger lurking near them. It appears that one of the gangways of the Ross Seam, of Slope No. 1, was driven around what is commonly called a saddle of rock; some of the breasts were on to the top of the saddle. On the morning of the 18th the twenty-six entombed men went to work little dreaming that they had looked on the earth for the last time. They had not been at work long before the rush of sand and water came, and, in less than an hour completely filled the gangways in the basin from floor to roof. Four men who worked in the basin at the foot of the saddle, finding the rush coming upon them, made desperate efforts to escape, but only one succeeded. He says: "On getting loose he looked behind him and saw the other three still struggling in the mud and sand, but they never got out and are still there."

(226)

As soon as it was known what had happened in that part of the mine the men in other parts of it escaped by an air-shaft, and at once means were adopted to rescue the men inside if possible, and if not possible to reach them alive to recover their dead bodies. A gang of men were set to work to clear a passage through the sand down a breast thought to be inside of the fall. By Monday, four days after the accident, they had reached the bottom of the basin opposite a hole which had been driven from the other side to the gangway on top of the saddle. As far as they could see with the light of a Clanny safety lamp, this hole was clear of sand, and they were greatly elated and encouraged by the prospect, believing that they could rescue the entombed men in a few hours. The hole was rising to a pitch of 45 degrees, and was too steep to climb without ladders or steps, and orders were promptly sent out for them. While waiting for them an old battery was cut out of the way at the bottom of the hole, and while doing that, small quantities of dirt were noticed to fall from above, which caused them to be watchful and ready to retreat in case a rush should come. Shortly after the battery was cut a large quantity rushed down and drove them all back.

The passage-way made through the sand was only three-and-a-half feet high, and about the same width, and was made a distance of about two hundred and fifty feet. The débris was carried away in buckets, and sixty men employed, one behind the other, handing the buckets back and forth. It was thought difficult for so many to escape in case sand and water rushed in again, therefore only seven or eight returned to see

what fell, and while they were at the bottom it rushed down again, and filled the passage all the way up to about twenty feet higher than when they started to make it, and the men escaped only by the greatest exertion. If the whole number had returned, there is no doubt that most of them would have been caught and added to the number already entombed; but, fortunately, the few that had returned were not so much in one another's way, and were thus better able to exert themselves and escape.

The company then commenced to survey and locate the fall and a hole seen on the surface on the map of the mine workings. The hole seen on the surface was a deep cone-shaped depression on the culm bank, and was about three hundred feet in diameter. When the survey was done, it proved that the cave broke in near the solid at the face of the counter-gangway on the top of the saddle or on the apex of the anticlinal, and that all the entombed men were very probably caught and killed soon after the sand broke into the mine, and that the two drivers, a runner, and a trapper boy, who had gone in with the cars half an hour before, were either with the men inside or were caught in the gangway by the sand and water. This dispelled every hope of rescuing the men alive, and cast deep gloom over the countenances of those who had worked so hard to reach them, and brought a cloud of sorrow over the homes they had left so cheerful a few mornings before, and eight widows and nineteen children were left without bread winners.

The survey also showed that the only way the bodies could be got out would be by clearing the

gangway from the slope in until they were found, and the work was commenced and pushed vigorously until the summer of 1886. The sand was found to be packed tight from floor to roof in the two gangways, and although they cleared the sand in the main gangway to within two hundred feet of the curve, in which the basin commenced, not one body was found. The officers of the company feared another rush of quicksand when the gangway was cleared to the curve, and every indication showed that such would take place; if it did, the bodies could never be recovered, and it was doubtful, also, whether the men who were engaged in clearing the gangway could have escaped if it rushed in under the pressure that was supposed to be behind it. This danger was fully explained to the men at work, and it was left to the men themselves whether they would work on and see if the bodies could be recovered or not. This they did for some time, but no satisfactory results were obtained, and the officers, apprehending danger to the men working in the other lifts, as well as those working there, abandoned the work, leaving the buried miners in their deep and silent tomb.

Some of the friends of the dead miners entered suit against the company, to compel them to recover the bodies. But the courts decided that sufficient efforts had been put forth by the company to do so and nothing more could be expected from them.

NORTH ASHLAND COLLIERY.

Early on the morning of May 13th, 1885, four men were killed by a rush of mud or mountain clay at the North Ashland colliery, Pa. The mine was an old