

THE MINING HORROR.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MINE.

Details of the Caving In—Destruction of the Houses and Burial of Their In-mates—Recovery of Some of the Bodies—The Inquest—The Cause of the Horror.

STOCKTON, Dec. 21, 1869.

The Alleghenies are in mourning. The hearts of the people are filled with gloom and apprehension, and, as if in sympathy with the sorrows of the agonized relatives and friends of the unfortunate beings swept from time into eternity by the terrible catastrophe of Saturday, nature has covered the verdure of the hills with a snowy pall, and the trees droop beneath the weight of their mournful attire. Houses built on the mountain top are proverbially secure, but here, on this elevated spot, 1,700 feet above the level of the sea, the highest point in Pennsylvania, human beings are trembling with apprehension, not knowing the moment when the earth shall quiver beneath their feet and hurl them into the depths below; and here sixty, perhaps a hundred, feet above the place where these habitations once stood seven persons, full of life and health a moment before their fall, still lie buried amid wreck and ruin, beyond hope and lost forever. The mountain is their tomb, and the cold wintry wind that whistles along its brow is their only requiem. The people come and go to and from the scene of the calamity in great numbers and intense excitement prevails. The yawning chasm still spreading, still craving for victims, is the object of most attraction, for the bodies of the three unfortunates, recovered on Sunday, are hid from view in boxes awaiting burial; but those who venture near the dangerous gulph are ignorant of the risk they run. Crackling noises are heard from time to time, and the earth slips down from the yawning sides with a thundering roar. The grief of the friends of the victims is mixed with personal apprehension; for, owing to the want of proper surveys of the mines that tap the mountains here on every hand, no one knows when or where the next creak may be heard, and the next plot of ground sink and disappear with all above it. The neighborhood of the disaster is fairly panic stricken; for those best qualified to judge unhesitatingly declare that sooner or later the whole town of Hazelton must go down. For the causes of this alarming condition of things I am not now able to indicate who will be charged with the responsibility, but before the close of my letter I hope to be able to present such facts as will enable the public to form a correct view of the state of affairs which rendered this terrible disaster possible. The acknowledged fact that the entire neighborhood of Stockton, as well as the town itself, is undermined, and in many places very near the surface, and that a greater calamity may occur at any moment, call for a more elaborate account of the origin, extent and characteristics of the accident of Saturday morning than has yet appeared. I therefore propose—having just completed a careful examination of the mine as far as I could go—to furnish you with the result of my investigations. With this purpose in view, however, I must commence at the beginning, even at the risk of being considered tedious.

HISTORY OF THE MINE.

The mine in which the accident occurred had a working capacity of two thousand tons per day, and was owned by Messrs Linderman & Skeer. Previous to the organization of this firm E. A. Packer, the same who failed for a million and a half in New York about two years ago, was proprietor of it; and the first shaft was opened and the first operations commenced in it by W. T. Carter, an English miner of great experience, who was also principal proprietor of the mine. The name by which the place was known in the mining districts was the "East Sugar Loaf." When Carter retired from business some fifteen years ago, his workmen had ceased to work that part of the mine immediately below the town in consequence of a "fault" being found, that is, a layer of rock presented itself and cut off the vein of coal. It appears that they did not know how many feet near the surface they had got, as no survey of the mine was ever made by Carter, but there is abundant evidence to prove that they considered the ground above perfectly secure. It is usual for miners when the vein has been followed up to a "fault" to abandon that particular portion of it, and in retreating to "rob the mine," or in other words, to remove the pillar of coal which during the working propped the subterranean edifice. If Carter's men did this it would not have been considered unusual or improper, even though the surface should fall in immediately after they had secured their retreat from the mine; but it seems to me, although attached of the present owners of the place loudly assert the contrary, that Carter never ordered the removal of the pillars, or if he did, that his order was not obeyed. Packer may or may not have "robbed" the mines in some places; that he did not disturb the pillars in the place where the accident of Saturday occurred is evident, for two of them are still standing. But that the present proprietors had commenced the "robbery" and were actually at work in the gallery nearest the surface a few hours before the falling in of the topping there is now no doubt. At the official investigation—if ever there is one—there will be many opposing elements and possibly much hard swearing; but I am inclined to think that there will be very little difference between this report of the accident and its causes, in the recital of material facts, and that of official inquiry.

THE SCENE OF THE DISASTER.

Miners generally retire to sleep early and rise between five and six in winter. The little community of 1,200 workmen and their families were wrapt in sleep on Saturday morning last at half-past four o'clock. The scattering town of Hazelton, of small cabins for the inferior working men—Irish, Welsh, English and Germans—and frame houses occupied by the miners proper, was as silent as the grave. The sky was clear and the aspect of the scene peaceful. A light glimmered here and there on the mountain side where working men were preparing early for the labors of the day, but more brilliantly shone the calm Christmas moon gleaming over the mountain top and illuminating the deep valleys and bringing out into bold relief the huge boulders of rock over which stood sentinel like the tall pines, firs and hemlocks, streaked the narrow road that runs through the town a hundred yards from the depot of the Lehigh Valley Railroad, and brought into clear view the parallel lines of the railroad running east and west from Wetherby to Hazelton. One-half hour more of silence, and the doors of the wooden houses facing the street would be alive with men, women and children; lamps would gleam in place of the then descended moon, and the hardy miners would have descended to their daily labor in the bowels of the earth.

THE CATASTROPHE.

But while nature's night light still lingered on the mountain's brow and dashed streaks of silver on the tree tops and overhanging rocks the quiet village was disturbed by the loud wailing of a dog. The brute did not cry with an ordinary yelp. No human foe was near; no apparent danger stimulated him to bark, but he made the echoes ring with his persistent barking. Mr. Wetterau was awakened by the barking of the animal, and finding that there was no prospect of his quieting down put on his clothes and went out to the building where the animal was. He then saw the cause of the alarm. A house near by stood leaning forward, and by the uncertain light it seemed to be falling. A loud crashing was heard, and the earth beneath him appeared to be moving. At this moment the moon sunk behind the opposite hill, and the scene was shrouded in impenetrable gloom. Wetterau instantly comprehended the situation and rushed to his house. He was nearly too late. His daughter, a young girl of seventeen years of age, being also aroused by the creaking of the timbers of the frame building and the persistent howling of the faithful dog, rushed out in alarm, clad only in her night clothes, and as she did so the earth opened before her and she was precipitated into the abyss. Happily, however, at this moment the inhabitants of several other houses were aroused by the shaking of the earth and the low rumbling noises from the earth and were rushing about in terror. One, more cool than the others, John Hoskings, saw her fall, and desperately attempted a rescue at the peril of his own life. Others speedily joined, and the unconscious girl was finally dragged out from the jaws of death by the stalwart arms of the assembled miners, almost dead with cold and crushed by the falling timbers. In the meantime the houses immediately over slope No. 1 sunk with the earth, and two families, who had not heard the alarm, went with them into the yawning chasm. It was dark now, but much blacker was the space 120 feet square or thereabouts which marked the entrance to the depths into which the four houses and ten human creatures had sunk from view. The names of the lost ones are Mr. Swank, stable boss for the company, his wife and two children; Mr. Rough, wife, mother and three children. Swank went out to see what the matter was and had a lamp in his hand when the alarm was given, and when he discovered that the ground was yielding ran back to save his family. He was too late. The house turned over him as he entered the door and all perished together. Mrs. Rough could have saved herself, but while there was yet time she broke from the arms of her husband, who was urging her out, and ran back to save her aged mother. Rough waited for her, and in another minute the earth opened its jaws and received them. In the same row of houses, or rather in houses on the same line with those destroyed, were several persons who very narrowly escaped destruction. The Stockton Hotel, close to the crop of the mine and about thirty yards from the railroad, escaped, as did also several lesser buildings on the edge of the chasm, but that they will stand very long is, at least, questionable.

OUTBREAK OF THE FIRE.

A fire broke out amid the debris at the bottom of the hole immediately, and at one time it seemed as if the mine was doomed to destruction. Happily, however, it was only the timber of the houses that had caught fire, and this terrible danger was on added to the calamity that smote the hearts of the crowds now gathering around the mouth of the crater. Word was sent to Stockton at once and the

bells of that hilly town began to sound over the Lehigh Valley, arousing the entire community with their quick-repeating peals of impending danger. The volunteer fire company of Hazleton, with Colonel Fitzpatrick, chief engineer, and Mr. J. C. Tomlinson, chief engineer of engine No. 1, at once turned out and proceeded to the scene of the disaster with all speed. The distance was two and a half miles by the road, and a keen, cold wind blew in the faces of the men; nevertheless the engine was on the ground very quickly after the first alarm. Two streams of water were poured on the burning mass from that hour (half-past seven) until eight o'clock in the evening, when all danger of a general conflagration was over. It is melancholy to have to remark on acts of inhumanity, but the truth must be told. The indifference of the crowd who surrounded the pit during the day was disagreeably manifested, and unbecoming levity was indulged in by many men and women. Men were heard to speak carelessly about the matter, and it was evident that the fell spirit of faction or nationality is active here among the miners. Irish, English, Germans, Welsh and Americans, they have all a common interest in the well being of their little society; but it would seem that each gang holds itself independent of and above the other, and that there is no community of feeling.

THE FIRST BODIES RECOVERED.

Six hours after the first crash another piece of ground east of and near the large pit gave way with a loud crash, but happily without carrying with it any of the people who were standing by. The firemen immediately picketed the ground with ropes and guarded the approaches to the hole as best they could from the encroachments of the crowd. There could not have been less than 4,000 people there on Saturday at any time. The day broke clear and fine, but about ten o'clock rain fell in torrents, then sleet, and finally snow covered the ground and whitened the forest trees, mournfully sighing and waving their white tops above the fatal chasm. Dark clouds careened aloft, from whose misty lids the tears of heaven falling on the vacant places of once happy homes had frozen into snow. The scene was desolate and mournful in the extreme, and gloom filled the hearts of all but the most callous of the people. The miners went to work heartily under the direction of Dr. Lindermann (a member of the firm), but up to Sunday at four o'clock they had not succeeded in reaching the place where the bodies were supposed to lie. Shortly after that hour, however, a pickaxe driven far into the loose earth brought up a piece of an arm, and soon after three bodies were disclosed to view. They were horribly disfigured. The first brought out was Mrs. Swank, who was partially dressed. Her neck and legs were broken; her head was crushed in on the sides and the skin on her body was peeled off. This latter evidence of the nature of the disaster was doubtless caused by the water which trickled through the earth on her while she was in the midst of the burning timber of the house. Mrs. Swank's daughter was the next body discovered. She was also frightfully disfigured. The little child, apparently two years old, which, covered with a blanket and in the arms of the poor girl, was scorched and bruised beyond recognition. These remains were carefully removed to the surface and laid in boxes preparatory to their being deposited in coffins for the inquest and burial.

As far as I can learn the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company afforded every facility to those who engaged in the labor of exhuming the bodies, placing special trains and men at their disposal. Mr. Clarke, master mechanic of the Railroad works here, was exceedingly active. No fault can be found with the action of the mining company after the accident. They appear to have been energetic and sincerely desirous to circumscribe the danger.

THE INQUEST.

An inquest was held yesterday on the bodies recovered by Justice W. P. Cartwright, Deputy Coroner; but, as it was merely to afford the friends an opportunity of identifying the remains, no evidence as to the causes of the disaster was taken. That will come off when all the bodies are recovered, if they ever are recovered.

The miners, to the number of fifty or sixty, are working day and night searching for the remaining seven bodies, but they have difficult and dangerous labor before them. The ground gives unmistakable evidence that another falling in may be expected; in fact, as I write, one side of the pit to the extent of several feet has fallen in. Should it extend in the same direction for fifty yards this letter will never see the HERALD office.

CAUSE OF THE ACCIDENT.

Now, as to the cause of the accident (so called), I have to say a few words before I close. When the present company commenced to work this mine, some twelve months ago, it was thought that No. 1 slope was fully worked out, and was not, therefore, touched. Carter, they say, worked it within twenty feet of the surface. It seems, however, that recently orders were given, or understood by the miners, that the supporting pillars in this particular part of the mine should be removed, or, in other words, that the mines should be robbed previous to being abandoned. The workmen commenced at them last week, it seems, and were nearly finished on Friday. At twelve o'clock that night a boy working in the mines heard somebody or something stamping on the rails on the flooring, as if giving a warning, and at the same time a creaking noise was heard and pieces of coal were seen to shoot up from the walls of the mine. The boy gave the alarm and the men away for the night beyond the risk of danger. It does not seem, however, that they notified the people above of the fact. The catastrophe then was caused by cutting away the coal pillars or supports to the roofing of the mine, at a place where it had been worked within twenty feet of the surface, and the destruction of life was caused by the neglect of the company to survey and map the mine and notify the drillers above of the impending danger. This, I think, is the truth of the matter, although an attempt is being made to lay the blame in another direction. It is to be hoped, however, that the truth will be allowed to come to light. We now live "not knowing what an hour may bring forth," and there is an exodus from this place of horror.