

JOHNNY McCAFFERY.

The Breaker Boy.

Johnny McCaffery was eleven years old when he became a man.

Five years before this his father and mother with their four children and steerage tickets sailed out of the Queenstown Harbor bound for the United States. They had heard of America - all Irishmen had- they knew that America had no English landlords, no rack rented tenants, no hopeless men and ragged women and hungry boys and girls. So, as they stood on the steerage deck and looked through the wire netting at the fading white houses and green fields of their native land, Owen and Bridget were light of heart. Beyond the great turbulent ocean were contentment, equality and wealth; a home for themselves and a brilliant future for the four children who, half in fear, and half in wonder were looking out at the white gulls and the white crested waves.

Two weeks later they landed in New York, were rushed through Castle Garden and hurried to the railway train where they set out for Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Within a few days Owen had found a job in the mines and had opened an account with a "Company" store, ^{and} rented a "Company" house, with a kitchen and parlor below and two little bed rooms above.

Down under the kitchen floor was a hole in the ground which was called a cellar and some rough wooden steps led down to the bottom from the side of the house. The hut was closed with boards which ran up and down and the inside was without paper or even plaster while here and there the cracks let in the day light and through the winter the wind and sifting snow. Owen and Bridget were a little disappointed at their home. In their little stone hut in their far off island they had never dreamed that a house like this could be found in a land so rich and free; but they were starting life in a new strange world, and with strong hopes and brave hearts they set to work to make the best of what they had, never doubting but what the looked for mansion would soon be theirs.

Owen went to work in the coal mines--down five hundred feet beneath the ground. Every morning he stepped on board a car he ~~held~~ held his dinner pail in one hand while he grasped the iron rail in his other hand and held his breath until it dropped him to the bottom, and then at night he went back to the foot of the pit and boarded the car to be taken again to the top of the earth.

But this story is about Johnny, so we have no time to tell more

of Owen, except that one day a great piece of rock broke off from the roof of the chamber where he worked and fell squarely upon him crushing him to death.

The miners took him to the top of the shaft and back to the little hut and consoled the helpless widow and children the best they could and then followed him to the grave and the story of his hopes and struggles was told.

Johnny was almost eleven when they laid his father in the little consecrated ground and put the white wooden cross above his head. He was at school the day the rock came down and had done so well that he was already in the third reader and had reached division in the arithmetic.

Johnny's older brother was already tending a door in the mine and his sisters were in school with him. ~~Luckily~~, ^{Some} years before, a wise, good man seeing how scant was the miner's income had built a lace mill so that his girls could earn something to help the family along. So one night when the older sister left the school she carefully packed up her books and slate and took them home and the next day went to the mill.

Bridget planned and saved the best she could. She had great hopes for little Johnny. He would surely be a scholar and make famous the McCaffery name; but all her hopes and struggles went for naught. Owen's funeral had left them hopelessly in debt and the earnings of the boy and girl could not keep the family alive.

There was really nothing left to do but send Johnny to the ^{breaker.} ~~mill.~~

The law had humanely said that a child should be spared from ~~to~~

^{the mine} until he was twelve years old, but Bridget soon ^{saw} ~~saw~~ that this law

was no protection ~~from~~ against poverty and want; so she went to

a Justice of the Peace and swore that Johnny's age was twelve and

sent him to the ^{breaker.} ~~mill.~~ She somehow did not think much about this

oath. In fact, she almost felt that Johnny was twelve years old.

She knew of other boys of the same age who were at work.

Well, Johnny went to the breaker. He was half way pleased to be released from school. If there is any place for a boy more cruel and hopeless than the breaker it is the ordinary public school.

Johnny lived about half a mile from the breaker where he went to work. Over and over again he had seen the huge rough black

building standing up against the sky, and just beyond, the great pile
which they called "colum"
of refuse that loomed up higher still, especially at night, they
rose up somber and black like the mountains just behind. The
front of the building was a hundred feet high. It sloped slowly
and evenly down to about twenty-five feet in height at the rear.
Its great sides were dotted with windows ~~that were~~ little gray
spots in the vast surface of black weather beaten boards. Johnny
had never seen a cathedral, but from the stories his teacher told
at school he thought this building was about the size of one of
those medieval temples--but it was a temple built not to God but
to mammon.

Along the side of the great building ran the zig-zag stairs,
and in the early morning light and sometimes before the gloom had
been fairly driven away, little boys tugged up the hundred steps to
the breaker's top. Here the cars of coal were raised in an elevator
and then dumped into a chute and went sliding and scattering down
through a myriad of sieves and chutes and turning wheels and the
jaws of the great iron ~~breaker~~ *roller* which crushed the large lumps into
little blocks, on, down, down, down, from the place where it started

a hundred feet above, until it landed in the huge iron pocket at the back of the breaker, twenty feet from the ground and just above the railroad track, ready for a gate to be opened to be let into the waiting car.

All the way down these long slanting chutes the lumps of coal tumbled and slid and fell the clatter and shuffle of the endless rushing black stone over the sheet iron lining of the long trough drowned even the sound of the whirling machinery and the crunching of the ~~ixam~~ mighty iron teeth that ground the large blocks into little bits while above all ~~the scene~~ an over-hanging black cloud of dust from the sliding coal covered the black building and the black young children with an everlasting pall.

Over the top of the slanting chutes was nailed a ~~great~~ row of little planks like wide steps upon a mighty ladder. Johnny was told to sit upon one of these little planks and put a foot on each side of the chute and then as the lumps of coal ran swiftly down between his legs to snatch out the pieces of slate as fast as his hands and arms ^{could} ~~can~~ move, and throw them into another pitching trough at his side. From the top of the great breaker, down almost

to the bottom, sat this stairway of little boys, each grabbing at a chunk of slate as the coal rushed madly by, until it passed the last boy and tumbled clean and free from slate into the iron pockets above the tracks.

It took Johnny but a little time to become a breaker boy, He only had to learn the difference between slate and coal and he had known this from a child. True it took some skill to snatch the stone ~~away~~ from the madly rushing black flood ~~xx~~ covered with its dense ~~simud~~ black cloud of dust, but little eyes are sharp and little fingers are nimble and it was really remarkable to see how this long line of little hands would unerringly grasp the slate and let the coal pass by. The rich man who owned the breaker, whose name was Fox, used sometimes to stand and watch these little hands lost in admiration of their dexterity and skill--their rapid movements and machine like precision seemed to him the beauty and ~~rithm~~ rhythm of a poem of perfect meter. *P* Mr. Fox had a daughter whom he dearly loved. He fancied that she had musical talent and he got her the most skillful teacher that money could procure. Sometimes

he stood by the piano and watched the girl take lessons in finger development and he marvelled at her dexterity and skill; but when he paused for a few moments beside the great long chutes and saw the black diamonds rushing down into his great iron pockets and watched the little deft hands of the breaker boys, he could not help thinking that the piano was not the only place to develop finger movement. Still, that was about all he ⁸thought. Mr Fox was not a bad man. He was really good. He loved his daughter and he intended to send her to Paris and Vienna to complete her studies when she was old enough and really every lump of coal that rolled down the chutes proved how fondly he loved the girl.

In a few weeks Johnny was a full fledged breaker boy. His mother woke him at six in the morning. He put on his oldest clothes ate his breakfast and went to the ^{Breaker.} mill. Morning after morning he climbed the long flight of stairs to the top of the breaker. Morning after morning he went down the ladder until he found his little flat seat, nailed across the chute. Then he sat down on the rough board, placed one foot on each side of the trough and waited for the flood of coal to come rattling down. In front of

him and behind him and at the side of him were other little boys covered with the same black pall that ever hung above his head. No one spoke or looked up in the gloom, they simply picked, picked, picked, while the black flood moved down. The constant stooping made his back very lame and sore. And often in the night his mother was awakened with his crying and left her bed to rub his little back. Then too in the winter when the frost was in the air and on the black lumps his hands grew cold and numb and he felt that he picked the coal with wooden prongs instead of flesh and blood. The nails of his fingers were worn; often he bound them with rags to protect them from the cold, or to save some bleeding wound made by the quickly rushing coal. His face was always as black as the coal that tumbled down the chute and the dust filled his nose and lungs and the flakes and splinters sometimes flew into his eyes, but still he worked away. Of course, he did not know why he worked. There was no more reason why he sat on the chute day after day than why Mr. Fox's daughter took "finger practice" on the piano in her luxurious home.

Not much happened to Johnny while he sat upon the hard, rough

board. Not much can happen to a boy of this sort and if it did, why should it matter? One day his little companion who always sat beside him ^{leaned his far over as he picked the slate, he lost his balance} ~~was careless as he walked down the ladder to his place.~~

~~and~~ He slipped and fell into the trough where the ~~large~~ lumps of coal ^{passed} down. He plunged madly along with the ^{rushing flood} ~~great lumps~~ into the iron teeth of the remorseless breaker. Johnny shouted but no one heard him in the din. Then he ran up the ladder and gave the signal to stop the great engine below, but of course, it was too late. It took a long while to stop the mighty machine and then it was almost an hour before the boy could be put together into one pile. ^{Several days thereafter} ~~Sometime that winter~~ a man in ^a ~~the~~ little town in Massachusetts thought that he saw blood on some lumps of coal that he was pouring into the top of his fine nickle plated stove--but still there is blood on all our coal-- and for that matter on almost everything we use, but a man is a fool if he looks for other people's blood.

It will not do to imagine that Johnny had no fun. He learned to chew plug tobacco and often went to the saloon at night. Of course he was pretty young for this--still a boy who is old enough

to go to a breaker is old enough to go to a saloon. When one is old enough to do manly work he is old enough to have manly sport. He used to go home at night so black that his closest friends could not have told his name. Then he washed himself in a tub of water in the parlor, *changed all his clothes,* got his supper and went out with the rest of the boys to play. There ~~was~~ ^{were} the ordinary games for boys; there were cats to stone; there was a great cave ~~far~~ where a house had gone down into an old worked out mine and where the boys gathered at night and built a fire from old rubbish, and where one boy who had gone as far as the fourth grade read to the rest, wonderful stories from the nickle novels that they managed somehow to get. Then there was the night school kept up for miners' boys and girls-- of course they could not be expected to study much after the days work at the mill. *but he often fell asleep when he tried to study,* Sometimes Johnny went to the night school, ~~but~~ he never got past the third reader after all. ~~so~~

So Johnny went on until his fourteenth year. There was really nothing to tell after that time and very little ^{before it,} ~~after that.~~ In fact, it is rather absurd to write a story about a breaker boy-- nothing happens to a breaker boy. There must be some dramatic

situation to make a story and there is nothing dramatic in an
~~endless~~ ^{Endless} life of toil. Strange as it may seem, Johnny never had
an unknown rich ~~uncle~~ ^h who died and left him a fortune. Mr. Fox
never looked down at his swiftly moving fingers and took a fancy
to him and ~~xx~~ invited him to his home and married him to his daughter.
In fact, ~~he~~ ^{Mr. Fox} never even saw him in the dust and gloom.

Almost all his life must be skipped because it is so dull. In
writing biography you cannot dwell long on the parts that are very
dull and you must entirely omit the parts that are very interesting--
and so biography is not biography after all. Anyhow Johnny left
the breaker when he was fourteen and was promoted to the place of
door-keeper in the mine'

Somehow I forgot to state that all of this was forty years
ago. ^P Forty years makes a great change in any one who lives upon
the earth--but it makes a greater change in the miner than in most
other men. Fifty-four is not so very old, so at least most of us
think who ~~cling~~ ^{cling} tenaciously to the forties, and still more those
who watch anxiously while the fifties are checked off. But at
fifty-four the man who has money and can have leisure still feels

that he is young. He can eat and drink; he can laugh ^{and} ~~or~~ dance
and play; he can marry and travel and write; in fact, can still
chase all the ^{phantasies} ~~fantasies~~ and bubbles that make us forget the waiting
open grave.

Forty years entirely transformed Johnny. Even his name was
changed; He was now John; generally uncle John. He had been a
door boy, a driver, a helper, a miner, and he had now come up out
of the earth to spend his last few years above the ground. His
face was scarred and one ear was missing. This came not from ^{war but}
^{from} powder all the same. A belated fuse ~~had~~ exploded when he thought
~~that~~ it had gone out. But still he counted this as luck for his
life was saved. One arm was crippled from a fallen rock and his
right hip was never free from pain, but this was only the rheumatism
that he caught while working in the ground. Except for the asthma
he could still have staid a number of years inside the earth before
the last time that he should be lowered down to come up no more.
But his old valves were growing more and more rusty every year.
He wheezed instead of breathed and he could walk but a very little
way and could stand upon his feet only a few minutes at a time.

His strength was almost gone. Some doctors would have advised rest and travel and a higher altitude, but his did not. In fact, he had no doctor. Every one in the mine knew all about asthma, the black shadow that hangs ever above a miner's life. John did not live in the same house where his father first placed him when he came from Ireland so long ago, but he lived very near the spot still in a "company" house. The miners, and the mules, and machinery, had changed from time to time, but the breaker, the black culm pile, and the "company" houses still remained.

In forty years John had buried his mother, had married raised a family and traveled back and forth along the short path from his hut to the open mouth of the mine day after day, and this was all. As the years had passed his one ambition had been to go back to Ireland, even for a short time, as his father's had been to come to the United States, but this ambition he had buried in the mines long years ago. He had left the valley once in forty years. He had gone to Philadelphia to the Centennial and his ticket had cost him \$5.40. This was a quarter of a century ago but he remembered the exact money that he gave in exchange for the little paste-board at

the station window.

John really had earned the right to rest, but then, he and his family must live--at least he thought they must--and so they must ~~if~~ else the coal could never be dug up. The mine boss was really not unkind, so when John told him that he could not go down the shaft again, he promised him an easier job. The boss took him to the breaker, up ~~the~~ the long flight of stairs, down ^{the} a ladder of little boards nailed across the chute and sat him down on the old board that he had left forty years ago. John was not a poet or a dreamer. In fact, he never had a great deal of imagination, and what he had was buried long ago in the deep, black mine. He did not seem to think of the strange fate that sat him down on the narrow board after the circle of his life was done. He thought no more about it than do the rest of us of the everlasting turning of the great wheel to which all ^{of us} ~~lives~~ are strapped.

This is about all ~~there is~~ of John's story. It is really up to date. The other morning he walked up the slope to the great black mill. As he went up the hill his wheezing could be heard a hundred feet away. Every few rods he stopped to rest. In his

right hand he carried the everlasting dinner pail. In his mouth was a black briar pipe. Thank God, he could smoke. He reached the breaker and started up the steps. At the first landing he stopped to rest. The boys rushed past, calling out, "Hello Uncle John!" At the second landing he stopped again, and so on ^{at each} to the top. Then he took a good long wait until he fully got his breath before he started down the ladder to his seat. Slowly and deliberately he sat down upon the rough, hard board. Mechanically he took his tobacco pouch from his pocket, knocked the ashes from his pipe, filled it full of fresh tobacco, put it in his mouth, struck a match upon the sheet iron lining of the chute, drew in his wheezy breath and commenced to smoke. Then he took his rheumatic leg in his hand, raised his foot until it rested on the right hand side of the long chute, ^{then he} raised his left foot to the other side, bent over and looked down at the black, iron trough and waited for the coal to tumble down.