

The Rock-fall

It was a long way down; a very long way indeed. Billy Bray sighed and took a fresh grip on the sides of the ladder as he resumed his descent into the darkness.

The daylight grew dimmer every time his foot felt for the next rung beneath him. Billy always missed the sunshine, but knew that if he did not work then he and his family would go hungry.

Although he had never been to school, Billy liked reading and he wondered what it might be like to be very rich and be able to go to a school.

As Billy started to go down yet another ladder he thought about poor Jim. The previous week, Jim had lost his footing and fell hundreds of feet to the rough ground at the foot of the ladders. Billy would never forget the look on the face of Jim's wife when he told her the awful news. As he continued his long downward journey, he wondered who would be the next miner to be seriously injured or killed.

'I want to think about more pleasant things,' he said to himself as he walked down yet another ladder. The only light now came from the candles stuck in the men's hats. Eventually Billy reached the bottom and

started to walk to the end of a long tunnel where they would be working that day.

All was going well until suddenly there was a very loud noise. 'What's that?' screamed Billy, as he sprang up from his cramped position on the rock-strewn floor. At exactly the same moment his work-mate, Joseph, shouted, 'Be careful.' A fierce blast of scorching air hurled past them. The tiny flames on the candles suddenly shot out horizontally. For a moment, it seemed as if they would be left in complete darkness. They heaved a sigh of relief when they saw that their dim flames were still alight.

The two men could barely speak because they were coughing and spluttering so hard. Hundreds, or even thousands of tiny chips of rock must have shot past them.

Billy opened his mouth again, but before he could speak a low rumble came from further down the shadowy passageway. The sound gathered in intensity. The two men pressed themselves back against the rock. Just when they thought their ears would burst, the noise ceased with an enormous scream that echoed around the cavity where they were squatting.

Joseph stared at Billy, waiting to see how he would react to the rock-fall. Billy was well-known for making light of danger. Sometimes he used very rude words. His work-mates used to say, 'Billy laughs at danger. Nothing worries him.'

On this occasion, the look on Billy's face was quite different from anything Joseph had ever seen before. This time there was no light-hearted comment. Instead he muttered, 'We could have been goners if we'd stayed where we were.'

Thousands of tons of rocks had fallen in the very place where they had both been hacking away only a moment before the explosion.

Billy shuddered as he realised he could now be lying lifeless under an enormous weight of rock.

Today nothing light-hearted came from his lips.

Eventually Billy and Joseph's shift came to an end spurred on by the thought that today was pay-day. Billy made his way up the ladder as quickly as he could. Billy was eager to discover how much money he had earned.

Eventually, he saw dim daylight peeping through the tiny hole at the top of the shaft. Billy's thought turned to the ale house and the pint of beer waiting for him there. The meagre wages he earned were often spent on alcohol before they were ever spent on food for his wife and children.

The long climb to the surface had left all of the men longing for liquid refreshment. The owners of the bar knew this so they placed it just outside the mine manager's office. As Billy went into the room he noticed that many of his mates were already sipping their beer. He was not a patient man and he became even more edgy as he waited to be served.

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Eventually, he had his drink and was sitting down with his friends.

People always enjoyed listening to Billy's wisecracks, but then something very strange happened to him; his mind went completely blank. He normally had no problem thinking of something witty to say to make the men laugh, but this day nothing came. The men always looked for Billy to cheer them up when they were sad. They knew they could rely on him to entertain them with a joke – often at someone else's expense. A hush came over the room as the men waited expectantly.

Everyone looked in Billy's direction. Strangely, for the first time since he had begun working in the mines, Billy could think of nothing amusing to say. The only thing that came to his mind was a picture of his own broken body lying dead, crushed under the weight of that rock-fall.

He paused, and all his friends continued to stare in his direction. He opened his mouth and then he smiled as a new thought came to him. 'Wouldn't Dad be proud of me now, with all these men waiting to hear what I have to say?' He glanced down at the mug and picked it up again. While it was still halfway between the table and his mouth, another thought came to him. 'Would his dad really approve of him spending most of his hard-earned money on drink, and wasting his precious time with these coarse men?'

As these thoughts went round and round in his head, Billy realised how much he missed his father. It only seemed like a few days ago that he saw him last. Yet it was sixteen years since his death. Billy had only been seven.

The rest of the men may have wondered why Billy was so quiet but, then, from near the back of the room he heard whispered the words 'rock-fall' and he knew they had been told of their last-minute escape from death. The mood in the ale house gradually altered as the men grasped the horror of that situation.

Billy sighed and let his thoughts travel back over the years.

He had worked hard since he had left home when he was seventeen years old, but sadly many of his rare moments of relaxation had been spent in the bar.

He remembered the humble cottage where he had been born twenty-three years before. Did the roof still leak when it rained? Every other worker's house in the tiny village of Twelveheads had had a leaking roof.

His childhood had been happy, until the day his father died.

He found it difficult to understand why God should allow his wonderfully kind father to die. One day his dad had been at work down the mines with the rest of them, but when he came home he did not want any dinner and he staggered up to his bed. Soon after that his mother started to cry and the people from the

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other houses came in, and they cried too. Before long, some men came and took his daddy away. Billy saw his father's coffin being lowered into a hole in the church yard. When they covered it over with earth, he stood and cried.

Because his father was no longer there to earn money, it was decided that Billy should move to his grandfather's home, which was just down the lane.

The days spent with his grandfather were the happiest in his life. His grandfather taught Billy to love books and enjoy singing. Every Sunday, and sometimes during the week as well, they went to the Methodist Chapel in the village. His grandfather told him how he and some others had built it many years before.

A sense of pleasure flooded through Billy as he thought about those evenings when he had sat with his head in a book – in the book, the Word of God. The Bible was one of the few volumes in his grandfather's house and Billy read it over and over again. He loved all those stories about Jesus and the apostles, but most of all he liked the one about David and Goliath, the giant.

Billy loved to hear about the time when his grandfather visited Gwennap Pit when he was a young man. The pit was an old disused mine that had left a deep hole in the ground. Steps had been cut into the soil all the way around it. It looked a bit like a Roman amphitheatre. The steps made good places for people to sit and listen to a speech or a play. Because of its

shape voices would be amplified and heard a very long way away.

Grandfather had heard that the Reverend John Wesley was visiting the area.

John Wesley travelled all around England to preach the good news of salvation and Jesus Christ. He spoke wherever people would listen to him. Some clergymen did not allow him to preach in their churches so John gathered the people around him and preached in the open air.

Billy remembered his grandfather had told him about that day, in 1762, when he had walked the few miles to Gwennap. Hundreds of other people were there as Mr Wesley spoke to them in that hollow pit.

Billy's granddad was born again that day. God spoke through John Wesley's lively preaching. He heard the call to repent of his sins and find peace by believing in Jesus.

Wesley spoke of how everyone was a sinner in need of God's forgiveness. The same message was told to the wealthy people who had studied at the big colleges in Oxford and the men who slept off the effects of their alcoholic drinks by the sides of the road.

Grandfather's old eyes had grown troubled as he told Billy how Mr Wesley had spoken about the terrible place called 'hell' where sinners ended up unless they repented and turned to Christ.

Then Mr Wesley explained the good news of the gospel. He told them that 'Jesus is alive today and

Saved from the Deepest Pit

everyone who is truly sorry for their sins may bring them to the Lord and he would take them away.' Mr Wesley explained that was why Jesus had died on the cross. 'He is the Son of God, the only one to live a sinless life. That meant that he was the only one who could give his life to pay for our sin.'

That day granddad and hundreds of others knelt down and called out to Jesus to wash them from their sins. Granddad had told Billy that this experience was being born again.

With a start, Billy suddenly remembered where he was. He looked at the mug of beer that was still in his hand and muttered to himself, 'Why didn't I follow granddad's advice?'

Instead of following his grandfather's way of life, he had gone in the opposite direction. Seeking fame and fortune were more valuable to Billy than following the teaching of Jesus.