

Coal Mining in the 19th Century

By Lily Glen

I rub the back of my hand across my soot smeared forehead, dripping with sweat, only succeeding in wiping more coal dust over my already dirty face, unrecognisable beneath the black. I don't care, no one can see. Not down here. Candles cost precious pennies so I work in complete darkness. I can't even see my hand in front of my face. Sighing I lean my bony shoulder against the rough, splintered wood of the coal cart, putting all my weight forward. The cart shudders onward, scraping against the stone floor of the low tunnel.

My name is Mary, I am 9 years old and I am a putter. I push the coal carts along the tunnel, to and from the coal face. I come in early and leave late, my back aching from being bent over all day. Many children work here. It's dangerous though. Children are frequently carried out of the mine with broken bones or burns from explosions. I earn 5p a day and give it all to my mother for rent. My mother depends on me. The year is 1859 and we live in Barnsley, South Yorkshire in a tiny cottage with my three younger siblings. There are two rooms in the cottage. We sleep on mats on the floor with a tiny tin bath and a fireplace. Not that we have any money for coal and I don't dare steal from the mine. Often children and adults alike return home, backs bleeding and raw from a harsh beating.

I break my chain of thought, grunting with the effort of pushing the cart, in the distance I hear a pit pony's far off neigh and I smile. I know how the ponies feel, after all I do the same job as them. I'm soaked, not just from sweat but from the water that drips down into the tunnels and on to the miners below. I push the cart onwards and soon come to the dim outline of an air door used to prevent contaminated air from moving along the tunnel. Because the tunnel is so narrow I cannot get past the cart to open the door, so a trapper sits behind the door, with a piece of string tied to their wrist, opening the door when they hear the cart scraping along the floor. Sure enough, I hear the sound of the door opening and see the faint outline of the child crouched against the side of the tunnel. As I go through I say 'hi' to the trapper. I remember what it was like to be one of them. Sitting in the dark all day, hunched over listening to rats scurrying along the tunnels.

I hear the ring of miners pick axes on the coal face, and their grunts of effort. I'm nearly there! Picking up speed I heave the cart along the track, fuelled by the excitement of getting to the face. At least then I can allow myself to rest for a minute or so. Then I will have to begin the long journey back with the cart, and this time it will be even heavier, full with black coal. Just as I go round a bend I hear an ominous rumble start to vibrate through the tunnel and the ground starts to move under my feet. Uh oh. I look up at the roof and see, even in the dark, shadowy, menacing cracks spreading across the roof like broken black hands of the dead, clawing at the stone. Shaking with fear, I tear the unsettling image out of my head and push desperately at the cart, willing it to go forward, to get to the coal face where I will hopefully be more safe from the tunnel collapse. My brain is urging me to leave the cart and run, but I can't. I cannot go around the cart because the tunnel is too small, the sides of the cart scrape against the side of the tunnel and so does the roof. The rumbling is getting louder, a hungry dragon emerging from the ground, but the coal face is getting closer, through the gloom I can see the faint, hopeful glow of the candles. Sweat is streaming down my face and now tears are mixed with it. I can taste the saltiness on my tongue. I can hardly control the cart now that the tunnel is shaking so much. Gritting my teeth I push on-nearly there! I step in the coal face, but

just as I do so a great boom sounds and suddenly the world disappears, like a snuffed out candle, and the last thing I see is the miners shocked faces before my eyes snap shut.

The world swims into view, fuzzy like an unfocused camera lense. I'm on my back and I try to remember where I am and what happened. I move and something hard digs into my hip. I remember now. The tunnel collapsed ... I sit up cautiously, the air is full of coal dust and it's hard to breath. I check myself, moving each limb until I'm satisfied that nothing has been severely damaged. All around me I hear the other miners shifting, waking up to find they are still alive. But we are not safe yet. The candles have gone out and we are trapped in the dark, waiting for help to arrive.