

Section from 'Recollections' by David Christie Murray when he was junior reporter on the Birmingham Morning News.

Ref Chapter VII **The Black Lake Rescue**

.....I was taking my way homeward, when the printer's "devil" overtook me after a breathless run and told me that I was wanted at the office. I went back to learn that there was a mine on fire at Black Lake, some seven miles away, and I was bidden to go and see what was to be seen there.

A hasty search through the time-table showed that there was no train running in that direction for an hour or two and so I was bidden to take a hansom and to use all despatch. The scene of the disaster lay a mile or two past the house in which I was born, and by the time at which I reached this point I could see that the tale was true. It was a perfectly still and windless evening with an opalescent sky, and far away I could see a great column of smoke rising like the stem of a giant mushroom and over it a canopy of smoke like the mushroom's top, and as I drew near I could see that the lower part of the column was faintly irradiated by the flames at the bottom of the pit shaft. The mine was situated in the midst of an open field and there was a great surging crowd about it which made way for me at a word. Round about the bed shafts of the mine, the downcast and the upcast, a little space was held voluntarily clear and half a dozen men in coaly flannels were standing there. A little tin pot of an engine in a miniature of an engine-house was labouring and panting at a little distance, and almost as I arrived upon the scene, the great iron bucket capable of containing as I should judge some five or six hundred gallons, was brought from the upcast, lowered there, set upon a trolley and then run along the rails until it could be emptied into the shaft in which the fire was raging.

This poor attempt to extinguish the flames was continued for perhaps a quarter of an hour but at last one of the little band said, "This is no good lads, we might as well stand round in a ring and spit at it. We shall have to get the 'Stinktors' out. A man or two will have to go down." The coal-smeared men were all standing close together and they looked at each other with faces pale beneath the grime. For a second or two none of them spoke, but as last one said, "Will you make one?" and the first man answered with a mere nod and a sullen-sounding growl. The others were appealed to each in turn, and gave the same sulky seeming acquiescence. I had at the moment no idea as to what it was actually proposed to do, but the plan was soon made clear. What the first speaker had called "stinktors" turned out to be little barrel-shaped objects about one foot by two,

They were called "Textincteur," and they contained some gas which in combination with water was fatal to fire. But when I reflected that in a confined space like that into which they proposed to venture, any gas which was fatal to fire would in all probability be fatal to human life, I almost wondered if the men were mad. Mad or no, they made their preparations with a deliberate swiftness which showed that they knew perfectly well what they were about. The man who had first proposed the venture was the first to set out upon it. The large iron bucket, technically called "bowk," was attached to the steel rope which hung about the smouldering shaft. The man stepped into this, the chain was passed about his waist, he was smothered in heavy flannels which were tied about him with cords; the end of a long coil of dirty, oily, coaly, three-ply twine was fastened round his right wrist, and he was swung into the smoke. The word was

passed to the engine-room, the little tin pot engine began to pant and snort 30 or 40 yards away and the man dropped out of sight. The coal-smear'd comrade who had charge of the twine paid it out delicately fathom by fathom. It was the only link between the adventurer down below and the chance of life, and the merest tug at it would have caused an immediate reversal of the engine and would have brought him back to bank. But no signal came, and for anything that anybody there could have told, the man below might have been suffocated by the smoke. There was not a sound to be heard but the creaking of the wheel as it revolved above the shaft and the hoarse panting of the little engine, and the crowd which had by this time grown to vast dimensions waited in so tense a silence that there was something awful in it.

How long we waited I cannot tell, but at last the signal came. The word was flashed to the engine room and the rope came gliding swiftly upwards. The hero was comatose and was hanging all limp and loose by the chain which had been passed about his waist. He was seized, swung to one side and lowered and landed and one great fiery flake of flannel as big as a man's hand fell from the rough garments in which he was swathed from head to foot. A bottle of whisky came from somewhere and was put to his lips and in a while he recovered consciousness though he was still gasping and choking and his eyes were streaming. In the meantime another man, as good as he, was ready, and he came back, as it turned out afterwards, blinded for life, but neither that nor anything that fear could urge could stay the rest, and man after man went down and faced that lurid smoke and hell of darkness undismayed, until at last their valour won the day and they brought out every man and boy and beast. One coaly giant yelled, "That's the lot," when the last batch came up, and then the crowd went mad, weeping, cheering, dancing mad. I have seen many deeds of valour in my time, both in peace and war, but I have never seen anything to match the Black Lake rescue for deliberate courage.