



MANX MINES ROCKS AND MINERALS

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UNDERGROUND AT THE
GREAT LAXEY MINE IN THE 1870s

The entrance is very difficult, being a narrow path on which the wagons run and which is not over dry at any season, but over this some three or four hundred people have to travel over eighty yards to and from work. Walking over the wagon rails or in the water we eventually reached the end of the level. We came to the place where the descent commences on the ladders, for by such means only the miners have access. I had put on a pair of old trousers and an old greatcoat to cover a white shirt. The word of command was given, 'Off with thy coat and waistcoat' and from the nature of the entrance to the deep mine I saw that this was absolutely necessary, for the hole was not more than two feet square and reminded one very forcibly of a street coal grid on a wet sloppy day. Having lit the candles and stuck them in front of our miners' stiff felt hats we prepared to descend after filling a bottle with cold water which runs in streams from the rocks above our heads, and which had got down my back already.

My guide leads the way with repeated injunctions to 'Hold fast with your hands' and 'Step on the ladder' and 'Follow your leader'. No sooner do our heads pass down the hole than out go the lights on both hats and we are left in darkness. A second and third time we try to preserve our lights, but to no purpose, until at last the guide had to take a candle in his hand and hold it against his breast to keep the wind from blowing it out, and at the same time holding on the ladder with one hand only. As for myself I must confess that I felt like Artemus Ward when going up in a balloon, 'considerably shaky', going down a ladder as straight as the sides of a well, and in darkness. I found too that

some of the spokes of the ladder were by long usage feeling quite loose and many of the iron binding-spokes were worn so thin that they felt in some places more like dull knives than round iron spokes. And, worse than all for a novice in ladder climbing, the spokes were so slippery and slimy from accumulation of wet clay and wet from hundreds of feet climbing them every day that it felt more like climbing a greasy pole at a country fair than climbing ladders. But we have now got to the bottom of the first set of ladders, and can take a little rest, and as the draught of air rushing down the shaft is not so strong the candle on each head can be lit again. I find it now much easier and can descend more quickly when each spoke of the ladder can be seen and the hand can grasp it more quickly, and with more certainty. But here let us remark that the light of a candle stuck upon a man's hat penetrates such a short distance into the surrounding gloom and darkness that you cannot see around you more than about four or five yards, and well it is so in climbing these fearful ladders. If a person could see as clearly as in daylight the heights of these rounds of ladders which are placed straight up, I question if from the fearful height they would look, one in fifty could climb or descend them. But as it is, except what is caused by imagination, it is only like ascending or descending ladders of four or five yards in length, only that much can be seen. If it were not so, there would be far more accidents in climbing the ladders than there are.

We have now travelled a considerable distance along what is called a level which has the appearance of a cave of considerable length cut out of the solid rock. I had

often wondered why the miners' hats were made so stiff and hard, but going along these levels I saw the necessity for it. Some of the levels are low overhead, the rocks in some places hanging down with sharp and jagged points, one of which coming in contact with a person's head would be anything but pleasant. We now descend a long series of ladders, most of them 120 feet long, and when we reach the bottom of each ladder there is a resting place six or seven feet square, and then another ladder of the same length, or according to the depth of the various levels. There is nothing very remarkable in descending these long ladders, except the accumulations of mud and clay which for generations have constantly dropped from the miners' feet as they ascended or descended, and which have formed fantastic shapes on the sides of the rocks; some being like huge mud icicles, others the shape of beehives, and other strange figures. But we are now near to the 165 level (990 feet), and the unnatural stillness of the place is now disturbed by a most unearthly sound. It is as if a hundred-and-fifty horse-power steam engine had been out on the spree and caught a cold, for the coughing and wheezing. I was somewhat startled by the strange sound, and as my guide had advanced ahead of me I felt a little nervous to proceed, but he called up the ladders 'Come and have a sight of the pumps,' and descending to the bottom we came in sight of the engine-shaft down which the pumping machine - worked from the big wheel above - descends, and up which the water from the whole mine is drained. This of course accounted for the asthmatic and consumptive sounds, but as nothing is to be seen but an extra quantity of wet mud, we descended to the 200 level (1,200 feet), where the pumping rods take a horizontal direction and, running along this level, enter the Welsh shaft. We now went to the 220 fathom level (1,320 feet), and as this is undoubtedly the richest ore ground in all the Great Laxey mine, my guide proposed that we should examine it. We therefore went to one of the drivings where the men had left work some hours before, and it was a splendid sight. The end, sides, and roof were completely sparkling with pure lead and blende, and the stuff just shot out consisted almost entirely of metal. We then examined the sump which leads down to the level, and it was 'rich extraordinary', as the miners say. The whole face of the rock for sixty feet down was one complete sparkle of

brilliant mineral, and looked more like a coal pit than a hard rocky lead mine. My guide took a pick-axe and ascended one of the ladders some four or five fathoms and began to fell the loose hanging rocks, when down came pieces of pure solid metal as big as my head. The driving we had just left, according to the last 'manager's report', was worth 50 pounds per fathom. My guide confidently asserted that three 'pitches' such as these would produce as much lead and blende as the whole of the mines are producing (this being the lowest level then worked). I said to myself, 'What a glorious future there is yet for this mine, properly worked, and with judicious management'. Here at the lowest depths yet reached the mine becomes richer and richer and more productive. The shareholders might well be proud of their property if they could only see the extent and nature of the ore ground in this deep level. We have, as I have said, just come back from the driving where the men had been working for about six hours. The place was still, after two hours ventilation, hanging black with powder smoke. I found a great difficulty in breathing, and the perspiration was running down my body in streams owing to the heat of the place and the close atmosphere. We had now got to the lowest level in the mine, although the pumping shaft was sunk ten fathoms lower, and feeling somewhat tired and exhausted we took a pipe - miners'solace - and a rest, and also a chat.

I asked my friend: 'Now, do you always go to work as soon as you get down to your pitch from the ladders?'

'No,' he said, 'we always as a rule take a rest in the level for fifteen or twenty minutes to cool the sweat before we go to work.'

So having fixed our candles anew in the soft clay on our helmets, we prepared to ascend. In going along to the 190 level my friend was very careful in holding his torch so that I could see where to step and exhorted me several times to 'walk in his footsteps', and on examining the level closely, I found it good advice, for in many places along the level I found it uncovered at the sides, and that sufficiently wide for a man's body to slip down if he missed his step. Inquiring how far the holes went down, I was rather astonished at the answer, - 'Only twenty yards' - but kept close behind, and made myself sure that I