

THE ROLLING STONE

WULL M'TEAR was one of those chaps that are never content. There are lots of them in the world. If he had thirty shillings to draw at the pithead on Saturday he thought he had worked hard enough for thirty-five. If the coal seam at which he was employed was wet and disagreeable he cursed the gaffer for sending him there, forgetting that there were other seams equally damp and equally uncomfortable. If he was out of a job he was ill at ease, but scarcely more so than when he had work to go to. In fact, if Wull had ever found a sovereign on the roadside he would have complained that it was not a five-pound note!

Yet, in spite of this not uncommon warp in his nature, he was one of the most amusing fellows in Lanarkshire. Nobody could lay off a yarn half so well as he; few could give him a start at any game or sport, and certainly not one of his mining compatriots would ever have dared to pit himself against Wull M'Tear in wordy warfare or a battle

of wits. He had a brain as keen as a needle, and had he had the advantage of education he would probably have made a name for himself. As it was, he was not even a good miner. His heart was always longing for other scenes than the grim, cold, dripping walls of the mine, and other and more pleasant duties than the constant hewing of black diamonds.

Wull's peculiarities of disposition asserted themselves in many unique ways. For the amusements of the ordinary miner, such as strolling out the quarry road of an evening, attending the dancing classes—the "jiggins"—or lining the ropes at the local football matches on Saturday afternoon—for these he had the most utter contempt.

Get up a cycle race, and he was the first to enter. Arrange a little prize-fight between two district champions, and he was one of the leading spirits in the "mill." Ask him to play football, and he agreed at once; to watch other fellows doing it, was, in his eyes, too ridiculous for words.

Wull kept a lurcher—a breed between a collie and a greyhound—and a bantam cock; the former for a bit of quiet poaching, when opportunity offered, and the latter for matching against any other bantam the district or county might possess. Both

dog and bird Wull loved with the full power of his being, and had it been necessary he would have starved himself in order that they might be properly fed and treated.

He lost the dog first—a great blow to poor Wull! It was this way: Out one morning on the lands of a farmer in the Blantyre district Wull and his trusty canine ran full tilt into the farmer while skirting a little plantation near the roadside. The farmer had his bull terrier with him, and the latter, at a word from his master, made short work of “Dick,” fastening on to the lurcher’s throat, and practically killing it on the spot. Wull refused to take to his heels and leave his dog, and the farmer was so struck with his devotion, and so melted by Wull’s distress at the animal’s sudden fate, that he not only did his best to save “Dick” from the iron jaws of the terrier, but told Wull that he “wouldna say a word about it to the sergeant.” Wull thanked him with tears in his eyes, and latterly carried home in his arms the dead body of his well-beloved dog. He buried it in the dusk of next evening with every manifestation of love and grief.

After “Dick’s” untimely demise, Wull lavished all his affection on the bantam cock, but when it was killed in a fight for two pounds ten shillings

a side with a famous bird from "The Shotts," he had nothing more to live for. A day or two later he disappeared from Hamilton. He had neither father nor mother to mourn his departure, and in a few days his name was forgotten. But I had always a sneaking fancy for Wull, and when I came to go out into the world I often found myself wondering whether I should ever meet him or hear of him.

I did both, and the incidents I will now relate are partly from Wull's own lips, and partly from the reports of other west country people who had happened to drop across him in the course of his wanderings.

On leaving Hamilton he went up to Glasgow and joined the Cameron Highlanders. Soon the regiment was transferred to India, whither Wull, of course, went with it, and he was not long there ere he became Captain's body-servant and valet. He got this job in rather an extraordinary fashion. Outside the barracks gate one night the Captain had taken by surprise a goodly number of the regiment enthusiastically looking on at what was evidently a stand-up prize fight between two brawny Tommies—an Englishman and a Scotsman. The

officer promptly put a stop to the proceedings, and reported them to the Colonel.

At the enquiry which ensued, it transpired that Private M'Tear and Corporal Robinson had had some words in the canteen concerning the soldierly qualities of their respective Captains. Corporal Robinson had characterised M'Tear's Captain as a "stuck-up prig, and no soldier," and Wull had replied to that aspersion on his officer by promptly displacing two of Robinson's front teeth. The subsequent fight had been duly arranged, and, when interrupted, looked like ending in an easy win for the fiery Scot.

The Captain of Wull's Company heard the whole story, and was so impressed with the youth's zeal on behalf of his honour that he made him his valet and personal retainer. A more faithful servant no officer could have wished for. Two years later the "Cameron's" were transferred from India to South Africa, and Captain D—— fell at the head of his regiment in one of the Modder River engagements. In the same fight Private M'Tear was wounded, and on leaving hospital was sent home to England to recuperate. Captain D—— had left him by his will a sum of £200, and with part of this money Wull bought his discharge from the army, assert-

ing to a friend that he would rather "fecht wi' his fists than wi' a gun ony day in the week."

The next time I heard of Wull he was doing splendidly in a small contractor's business down Portsmouth way, but a year later I learned that the charms of a touring pantomime fairy had proved too much for him. Together they made short work of all his available funds, and the business collapsed like a pack of cards. When Wull's money was finished, the fairy went off with some other man; "fairies" of this description always do so!

Two years elapsed, and Wull M'Tear was the last man in the world I was thinking of as I strolled down Lime Street, Liverpool. Up he popped, however, and extended his hand. We shook and adjourned to the Victoria Hotel, where for fully three hours Wull kept me in fits of laughter, relating the experiences of a life which was as chokeful of incidents as an egg—a good one—is full of—well, fulness.

Since the Portsmouth contracting business was sacrificed for "love," Wull had had a most varied and adventurous career. He had wandered the streets of London without a copper in his pocket. He had "borrowed" ten shillings from an old com-

panion that he met one night at a music-hall door, and ran it into £40 by the aid of a "dollar double event" and subsequent lucky bets. With this money he went to New York, only to get robbed of his last cent, laid out, and left for dead in a Bowery gambling den. Then somehow he gravitated to Chicago, and got work in one of the huge canning factories. But the "dead dog line of business," as he remarked, had no fancy for him, and latterly he shipped as a cook's mate on a tramp steamer from San Francisco to Australia. The Island Continent held out no attractions for him, and another long voyage—this time on a sailing ship—saw him land once more in New York. From there he signed on as an attendant on a Liverpool-bound cattle ship.

"And there's no more sailing for me, Harry, ma lad," he went on. "Anybody that fancies the sea should just make one trip on a cattle boat, and he'll never ask to see salt water again! Talk about hell upon earth!—a cattle boat's hell on the ocean! However, the trip sort o' set me on ma feet again, for I won £12 10s. at faro on the voyage—cleaned out all the cattlemen on board, gaffer included!"

Wull next settled down as a hairdresser in a village near Fleetwood, buying for £5 a business in

this line which he saw advertised. I will now let him tell the rest of his story in his own words, although I cannot hope to convey any idea of the side-splitting manner in which he related the very latest adventure of a human rolling-stone.

“The barber’s business,” he went on, “was well worth the fiver I paid for it, and I could quite easily see a livin’ in it—until I got tired o’ scissor-clickin’ and razordiddlin’!” (I didn’t ask him where he had acquired these handy accomplishments, but I knew that Wull was a man of many trades.) “It was all right in the daytime, with ‘shaves’ and ‘hair cuts’ droppin’ in at intervals, but the village was deadly dull at night, with only two pubs and no theatre and music hall. So a lively idea struck me. Among my customers were a number o’ village young fellows and farm servants from the surrounding district, and it occurred to me that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to start a sort of athletic class in my back shop after business hours.

“The back shop was a large, roomy place, an’ it cost very little to fit it up with a few chairs, a punch ball, two sets of Indian clubs, a pair of dumb-bells, a 56-pound weight, a pair o’ boxin’ gloves, an’ half a dozen spittoons. I told a few o’ the boys what I was doing, an’ they weighed in with

their half-crown entry money like real toffs. I got a board painted with the words, 'William M'Tear, hairdresser and athletic tutor,' and hung it above the shop door. In less than a fortnight I had fully a dozen 'pupils,' but the athletic training I gave them consisted chiefly of playing dominoes with them for a penny a 'chalk.'

"However, I occasionally put on the gloves an' had a round or two with the bigger and stronger fellows. I was always pretty good at 'jukes up,' as you may remember, Harry, an' I had no trouble in more than holding my own with all-comers. But one night a big country chap with whom I was sparring gave me a nasty jab on the eye. He didn't mean it, bless you! but I lost ma dander and let him have a square one on the jaw. He went down and out like a wax vesta. He came round in a few minutes, an', of course, I told him that I didn't mean to hurt him, that I was very sorry, an' all the usual rot. There was a queer look in the fellow's eye as he said good-night. But I paid no notice, and only remembered it when it was too late.

"He came back quite regularly, but never put on the gloves again. One night about ten days after the knock-out incident he introduced a new 'pupil' to me—a friend of his from a neighbouring farm,

he said. The newcomer was a thick-set, stupid-lookin' chap of about twenty-four, who kidded as neat as ninepence that he had never seen an Indian club, a dumb-bell, or a boxing glove in all his life. I was very nice to him, bein' a new pupil, you know, and explained all about my system of physical culture between the 'hands' in a game of penny nap. Latterly one of the boys, a pal of the chap I had knocked out, innocently suggested that I should give the newcomer 'a lesson with the gloves.'

"I suspected nothing even then, an' cheerfully pulled on the mitts. The stranger did the same, an' we set-to. In less than five seconds he had fetched me a 'hook' on the ear that sent me staggering to the ropes—into the fireplace as a matter-of-fact! The whole plot dawned on me there and then; big Dan 'had it in for me,' and had brought over some professor at the game to lay me out. But I made up my mind to die game! I rushed in an' tried to plant a 'wind-jammer,' but my man was too quick for me, an' landed a square punch on the jaw that made every tooth in my head rattle. There was no question of rounds in that fight, Harry; less than one settled me. When I came to my senses all my friends and pupils had cleared out save one, an'

he was my Saturday night 'scraper'! What a picture I was! My own mother wouldn't have known me! Both my eyes were plugged, my nose was spread over my face, my left ear was split in halves, an' two o' my front teeth were missin'.

"I was in bed for a week. When I came down to open the shop, I found that another fellow had started as a barber six doors up the street, and a look at his place soon showed me that my shanty was an 'also ran' to his 'winner.' Even my Saturday night 'scraper' had deserted me and gone over to the opposition. I left the village for good with the evening train that night. The porter at the station was a pal of mine—many a 'hauf' I had stood him—an' he told me that the bloke who knocked me out was none other than 'Welting William, of Wallsend.' Big Dan had seen him perform in a booth at a neighbouring village, and had prevailed on him—for a consideration—to come over to my place and give me a 'doing' in return for my too strenuous attentions to himself. I've chucked the athletic-tutor business for good, Harry—too dangerous!"