

THE MINER'S BAIRN

FOR nine weeks the miners at the Straight Colliery had been on strike.—nine weeks of careless idleness to the boys; of dour, uncomplaining hardship to the majority of the men; and of real, genuine misery and hunger to hundreds of their dependents. I forget now exactly what it was about, but I have no doubt it was over some trifling question of wages which the coalmasters could have settled to the satisfaction of the miners without losing a quarter per cent. of their swollen dividends.

I was one of the strikers, and swore, along with my companions, rather to starve than give in. At the same time there was no real prospect of my being so far reduced in a physical sense. I was unmarried, I had a good few pounds in the Savings Bank at Hamilton, and all my brothers were in full employment at other pits. So it cost me very little to cheer the Miners' District Agents when they counselled us to "stand firm" and resist to the last the oppression of the heartless capitalists who

worked "the Straight" at such enormous profits! (What these profits were, of course, I had no idea, but I was certain they ran into millions of money, and that I assisted very materially to earn them.)

Yet some of the men, with wives and families dependent upon them, did not in their hearts echo the defiant "We'll never give in!" They knew too well that strikes meant gaunt, unhappy homes, haggard wives, hungry bairns. Albeit, they said nothing, and, tacitly at least, gave their loyal support to the strikers.

Jamie Forsyth was one of the silent men. He "came out" as a matter of course with the other miners, and attended all the meetings, though he took no active part in the proceedings. Latterly his face, never very mobile, became drawn and more serious-looking than ever, and his eyes had a strange, wild gleam in them which we could not fail to notice.

One afternoon Forsyth and I met on our way home from a mass-meeting of the men, and I jokingly chaffed him about taking the strike so much to heart. We had right on our side, I added, and were sure to win in the long run!

"Harry," he quietly remarked, stopping on the roadside and looking me full in the face with his

keen blue eyes, "strikes are for them that can afford them—no' for a workingman wi' an unwell wife and a wean that's dyin' for want o' nourishment. Strikes! How will we ever make up for the money we've lost this past six weeks? An' what benefit is a strike, even if we win, if it costs us the lives o' those that are near an' dear to us?"

I could not answer Jamie's passionate outburst, and we parted at the corner of the street in which he lived. It was many months afterwards that I came to learn the incidents which I now incorporate under the title of "The Miner's Bairn."

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"Is there ony settlement yet, Jamie?" asked a weak voice from the bed as Forsyth entered his little dwelling.

"No, Mary," bitterly replied her husband, throwing off his cap; "an' nae chance that I can see! The maisters are firm, an' the miners a' say that they're determined to sterve rather than cave in. It strikes me they'll jist hae to sterve. Hoo are ye noo, dearie—ony better?" and Jamie leant over the bed and gazed down with tear-dimmed eyes on the wasted features of his wife.

"Oh, I'm no' that bad masel', Jamie," replied the

young woman, making a brave effort to smile, "but the wean doesna seem to be thrivin' at a'. He's sleepin', for a wonder; but he's far frae richt, Jamie—he's far frae richt." Then, after a pause: "It'll break ma hert if onything comes ower him." And the tears rolled down the pinched, wan face of Mary Forsyth.

Jamie turned away with a tremble at his mouth, and sat down beside the spark of fire that burned feebly in the grate. Latterly he stirred the embers, and proceeded to boil the kettle, in order to make himself a cup of tea. His wife was quite unable to take anything in the way of food; all that she was allowed by the doctor being milk or beef-tea. The milk Jamie was still able to afford, but the beef-tea and other sick-bed delicacies were now quite out of the question.

The Forsyths had been married little over a year, and a week after the strike commenced at the Straight Colliery Mary had brought into the world a baby boy. Never strong herself, the ordeal proved almost too much for poor Mary, and her life was despaired of, Dr. M'Whirr telling Jamie plainly that even if she lived she would be an invalid for months to come, and adding that it was also a mere chance of the child pulling through.

Fortunately the doctor's worst fears were not realised, although his prediction about the young wife proving an invalid turned out to be too true. His doubts for the child also seemed to have been well grounded. For several weeks Mary's mother lived with her daughter and son-in-law, and did everything possible for their comfort and well-being. Jamie had, luckily, a few pounds in the bank, and was able for some time to meet all the many demands upon him, and to provide the necessary nourishing food for his wife and infant son. Meantime the strike continued with unabated rancour on both sides.

Jamie's kindly mother-in-law had ultimately to return to her own domestic duties, and he was thus left alone to attend to Mary and the baby. His savings were soon spent, and the few shillings that he received weekly from the Union were all required to keep a house above their heads and to purchase the bare necessities of existence. Poor fellow, he would gladly have laid down his life to see his wife well and strong, and to hear the merry "goo-goo" of his little son.

He was moodily seated at the fire, his heart a prey to all sorts of melancholy fears and doubts, when there was a sharp rap-a-tap-tap at the door.

He sprang up and opened it, and in strode the doctor.

“Well, Forsyth,” was the medical man’s greeting, “how’s the wife and wean the day?”

M’Whirr was a kindly hearted but exceedingly brusque practitioner, who had once been in the army, but who had settled down in his native Lanarkshire, and had acquired a very large practice. It is a strange thing to say, but I always had the opinion that M’Whirr earned his popularity as much by fear as anything else, although there never was any question that the doctor’s popularity was of the most extensive nature. The doctor had a habit, too, of speaking in the broadest of Scotch, and this habit he affected towards rich and poor alike. He was a bachelor, and reputed to be very wealthy.

Jamie shook his head mournfully. “There’s nane o’ them very braw, doctor,” he quietly remarked. “But I suppose ye’ll see that for yersel’,” he added.

The doctor spoke a few words to Mrs. Forsyth, gave her one or two professional instructions, and refused to allow her—as she desired—to waken the sleeping child at her side. Then, turning to Jamie, he said in a half-whisper, “Come outside, Forsyth, I want to hae a word wi’ ye.”

Forsyth picked up his cap and passed outside with Dr. M'Whirr. The doctor led the way to the end of the "raws," then stopped and addressed Jamie in his usual direct fashion.

"Look here, James," he began, "I've a proposal to make to ye. Listen carefully and don't interrupt! Your wife's not at all well—in fact, she's worse than either you or I think. As things look at present she may, or she may not, get round the corner; the child will certainly not live unless it is taken away and properly cared for. Now, what I propose is this: I'll adopt the wean, save its little life—if at all possible—and make a man and a gentleman of it. I'm a bachelor, I've got more money than I can ever spend, and I want to have something to leave it to! If you agree I'll give you a hundred pounds, and you know what that sum will do in the way of saving your wife's life. I'll give you two days to think over the deal; my own opinion is that you're an ass if you don't accept it. Good-afternoon!"

Jamie's first inclination was to shout a malediction on the head of the departing figure for proposing what, at first blush, seemed so inhuman a scheme. But he refrained from the temptation, and as he walked slowly homewards he found himself,

almost against his will, weighing Dr. M'Whirr's proposal in the balance. And, curiously enough, love was the measure on both sides of the scale.

When he re-entered the house the child was wailing plaintively in his mother's arms, and the sounds of its little voice went to Jamie's heart like knife-thrusts.

"Oh, Jamie!" exclaimed Mary in that low, wearied tone which had been hers for weeks, "the poor wean! the poor wee wean! What can we dae for him? Does the doctor no think he'll get better? Is that no' what he wantit to say to ye? Tell me, Jamie, tell me; I want to ken the worst." And Mary began to sob bitterly.

Jamie, who had his doubts about telling his wife the purport of the doctor's remarks, resolved there and then to make the confession. He did not put the matter so bluntly as the doctor had done, but merely hinted that Dr. M'Whirr had taken a fancy to the bairn; that he thought its life might be spared by careful treatment at that gentleman's own home, and that he had asked to be allowed to take it there.

"Tak' it awa' for good, Jamie—isn't that what he means?" meekly inquired Mary, who had followed her husband's recital with intense interest. "I

wouldna like to pairt wi' the bairn—God kens that, Jamie—but if—if—oh, Jamie, I canna bear to see it pinin' awa' at ma side an' no able to help it!" And the poor girl again began to cry, and she turned her face to the back of the bed.

Jamie had not told Mary anything about the doctor's financial proposal; he thought it better meantime to leave that part of the suggested arrangement alone, but when he saw how his wife was affected by his story of the doctor's scheme he much regretted that he had been led into speaking of it at all.

He hung over the bedside, clasped his weeping wife in his arms, and softly murmured in her ear that nobody should have their "wean" if she didn't want to part with it. The doctor doubtless meant it all through kindness of heart, he went on caressingly, but neither he nor any other person would dispossess them of their darling baby! Come weal, come woe, they would keep him at all costs! To such words as these, again warmly whispered, poor Mary fell asleep that night.

But next morning the child was worse, and Mary, of her own free will, once more broached the subject of the doctor's offer, pleading to Jamie that she herself would feel better if she knew that the bairn

was being well fed and well cared for. "It's hard to see him dee, Jamie," she wailed; "an' if he should slip awa' at ma side I'll no' be lang in followin' him! It's 'cause I love the bairn dearly, an' you tae, Jamie, that I think we should gie him to the doctor. He'll be guid to the wean, I'm sure."

It was with a heavy heart that Jamie Forsyth rang the bell of the doctor's house that afternoon. The thought of parting with his first-born was uppermost in his mind, but always came the vision of Mary's eyes looking wistfully in her suffering baby's face and the sound of her words, "If he dees at ma side I'll no' be lang in followin' him!"

Dr. M'Whirr was at home, and his usually hard visage brightened perceptibly when he saw Forsyth enter his surgery and heard his decision.

"Ah!" he explained, "that's good! We'll save the bairn yet, I think! And to-morrow you'll get your hundred pounds."

A swift look of pain crossed Jamie's face. "I wasna thinkin' about the money, doctor," he said in a low, agonised tone; "it's the bairn's life we're concerned for. Ye can keep your money."

"A bargain's a bargain, Forsyth, and you'll get the money to-morrow when you sign the adoption papers. I'll call with a nurse in the afternoon.

Now I must be going. Remember—to-morrow afternoon!"

Mary Forsyth shed many bitter tears that night, and it was as much as Jamie could do to prevent himself breaking down altogether. But for his wife's sake he assumed a cheerfulness which certainly wasn't in his heart. Again and again he whispered soothing words to Mary, assuring her that the doctor would be able to save the child's life, and that the mere knowledge of its recovery, in his skillful hands, would have a powerful effect in restoring health to herself. Jamie never said a word about the doctor's financial intentions. He was ill at ease on this phase of the matter, and felt a certain guiltiness whenever his thoughts reverted to it. And to his credit it must be said that the doctor's money was an outside consideration compared with the prospect of saving the life of the bairn.

At three o'clock next day there was a rumble of carriage wheels in the "raws," and a few moments later Dr. M'Whirr entered the Forsyths' little dwelling. He was accompanied by an immaculately attired nurse.

"Well, James," exclaimed the doctor, advancing to the bedside, "how are the patients to-day? No very braw, I'll warrant! But we'll soon hae 'em

both right—at least I hope so. And so,” turning to Mary, as she lay in bed with a wan smile on her face, “you’ve decided to let me have the bairn! Good! I’ll do everything for him that skill and money can do.”

While the doctor was speaking, Mary had clasped the little bundle of frail humanity close to her bosom, and was kissing it passionately, while the silent tears coursed down her cheeks. Jamie half-turned away his head.

Dr. M’Whirr realised the uncomfortable position of all present, and beckoned to the nurse to approach. Mary saw the signal, and thereupon tremblingly held out the child in Jamie’s direction.

“Kiss him, Jamie—for the last time,” she whispered. “Puir wean, puir wee wean; oor wean, Jamie!” Still holding out the child, Mary buried her face in the pillow and wept aloud.

With a great sob Forsyth tenderly caught the child in his strong arms, and pressed it to his breast. Then, turning with flashing eyes full on the doctor, he exclaimed: “We canna dae it, sir; we canna dae it! We’ll jist keep the bairn, an’ if it’s God’s will he’ll dee in his mither’s airms! I ken ye’ve meant it for the best, doctor,” he con-

tinued, "but we canna pairt wi' the wean. Live or dee, he remains wi' us."

On hearing her husband's ringing words, Mary looked swiftly up from her pillow, and there was in her eyes a gleam of intense joy. She said nothing, but simply held out her hands. Bending down over her, Jamie silently replaced the child in her bosom, to which the mother strained it with a glad, delicious moan.

Dr. M'Whirr pointed the nurse to the door, and followed her outside without another word being spoken.

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From that hour mother and child began to mend, as we say in Scotland. The real improvement, however, set in next day when a large hamper of sick-bed delicacies was delivered at the Forsyths' house by an unknown messenger, who absolutely refused to divulge whence he came or by whom he had been sent. But Jamie and his wife had a shrewd suspicion that Dr. M'Whirr knew more about the hamper than anyone else, although he stoutly denied it when he called professionally later in the day. This time he came afoot, made no reference to the events of the preceding day, and ex-

pressed great delight at the manifest betterment in the condition of both patients.

"I heard on my way down, James, that the strike's over," remarked the doctor on taking his departure. "Ye'll no' be sorry, I suppose?"

As the door closed behind the kindly hearted doctor Jamie Forsyth went over to the bed, impressed a glad, loving kiss on his wife's lips, and then gazed long and tenderly on the features of the sleeping bairn.