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GERMINAL;

Or, the Story of a Great Miner's Strike.
 BY EMILE ZOLA.
 Translated from the French.

CHAPTER I.

On an open plain, under a starless sky black and thick as ink, a solitary man was following the main road from Marchennes to Monton, a paved way of ten kilometers, cutting straight through fields of beets. He could not even see the dark ground before him, and he was insensible to the immense plain around him, except from blasts of March wind, great gusts as on the sea, biting cold, sweeping over leagues of marsh and naked field. No shade of tree speckled the sky; the road unfolded itself with the regularity of a jutty amid the darkening shadows of the night.

The man had started from Marchennes at 2 o'clock. He had walked with great strides, shivering beneath the thin lining of his velvet vest and fpanalons. A small bundle, tied up in a checked handkerchief, annoyed him greatly, and he rested it against his hips, sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other, to enable him to put both hands into the depths of his pockets at the same time, hands numbed and deprived of blood by the cutting east wind. A single thought occupied his mind—a mechanic without work and without home—the hope that the cold would be less severe after the break of day. For an hour and half he had proceeded in this manner, when, two kilometers from Monton, he perceived, on the left, some red fires, three braziers of glowing coal burning as if suspended in the open air. At first, through fear, he hesitated, then he could not resist the pitiful desire to warm his hands an instant.

A steep path ran down before him. Then all was dark. On his right was a high bearded fence shutting in a railroad, while on the left rose a weedy slope surrounded by a confusion of gables, the outlines of a village of low and irregular roofs. He took about two hundred steps. Suddenly the fire again came into view close to him, at outside of the path, without his comprehending they how burned so high in the black sky like luminous moons. But close to the ground another spectacle made him pause. It was a heavy mass, a cluster of low buildings, from which rose the outlines of the chimney of a factory; strange lights came from the dirty windows, outside five or six tall lanterns were hanging from a frame structure, the blackened timbers of which vaguely defined the outlines of a huge trestle-work, and from that phantom-like apparition, shrouded in smoke and darkness, a single sound was heard, the long, loud respiration of escaping steam, which was not visible.

Then the young man saw it was a mine. He again became disheveled. What good? He would get no work there. Instead of directing his steps toward the building, he finally ventured to climb the hill on which burned the three coal fires, in iron kettles, to give light and heat. The outside workmen had been obliged to work late; they were still clearing away the useless rubbish. Now he could hear the pushers shoving their carts upon the trestles, and he distinguished flitting shadows tipping them up near each fire.

"Good evening," said he, approaching one of the kettles.

The driver was standing with his back to the fire, a little old man, dressed in a purple wool jacket, on his head was a old rabbit skin cap; while his horse, a large fawn-colored beast, waited motionless as stone, while they emptied the six cars which he had drawn up. "Good evening," replied the old man.

The work was done by an assistant, a jolly fellow, red and healthy, who hurried little, pressing upon the lever with a heavy hand. Up there the wind was still more severe, a freezing wind, whose great regular blasts swept on like the blows of a scythe.

"Good evening," replied the old man. Silence followed. The man who felt himself regarded with suspicion immediately made known his name.

"I call myself Anton Lautier, I am a machinist. Is there not some work for me here?"

The flames threw a light upon him, he was about twenty-one years old, very dark, a handsome fellow, apparently strong notwithstanding his slight limbs.

Reassured, the driver shook his head. "Work for a machinist? No, no, no." There were two here yesterday. There was nothing for them.

A gust of wind cut off his words. Then Etienne demanded, pointing to the dark spot where the buildings stood at the foot of the hill, "That's a mine, is it not?"

That time the old man could not respond. A violent fit of coughing choked him. Finally he spat, and his spittle left a dark spot upon the ground.

"Yes, a mine, the Vulture. The entrance is close by."

Then, with outstretched arm, he pointed out in the darkness, the village, the confused roofs of which the young man had already discerned. But the six cars were empty; with rheumatism he followed them without a crack of the whip as the great fawn-colored horse had started off again, unbroken, plodding along between the rails, under a fresh squall of wind which ruffled up his coat.

The Vulture was now becoming dear to him. Anton, who had forgotten to warm his blood-chilled hands at the fire, was intently studying and making out each part of the mine, the tower shed for screening, the tower of the shafts, the large room for the hoisting engine, and the square turret of the machine for drawing. This mine, down in a hollow, with its low brick buildings, lifting its chimney like a threatening horn, to him had the horrid semblance of a ravenous beast, crouching there ready to devour the world. While he was looking, he thought over his life of the last eight days, a tramp seeking a place; again he saw himself in the railway shop, slapping the face of his chief, driven from life, driven from everywhere; Saturday he had arrived in Marchennes, where they told him he could get work at Forges; but there was nothing, either at Forges or at Sonneville, he had spent Sunday concealed in a ship yard from which the superintendent ejected him at 2 o'clock in the morning. Nothing, not a son, not even a crust, had he obtained on the road; without aim, not even knowing where to shelter himself from the storms. Yes, it was undoubtedly a mine, this strange lanterns lit up the entrance to the shaft, a door opening suddenly enabled him to catch a glimpse of the furnaces of the hollers in a bright light. He now understood the escapement of steam, that great

long respiration, puffing without stop, as if the breath of the monster was choked.

The assistant, rounding his back, had not even lifted his eyes to Anton, and the latter was about to take up his little bundle, which had fallen on the ground, when a fit of coughing announced the return of the driver. They saw him coming slowly out of the darkness, followed by the fawn-colored horse, who was bringing up six new filled cars.

"Are there any works in Monton? asked the youth.

The old man split black, then answered in the wild:

"Oh, it's not works that are wanted; that ought to have been seen three or four years ago. Everything was prosperous. It was impossible to find workmen, they had never earned so much."

"And then they began to feel the pangs of hunger. Sad fact for the country; they discharged the people, the shops shut up one after the other."

"It is not the fault of the emperor, perhaps, but why does he go to fight in America without considering that the brutes die of cholera as well as others?"

Then, in short sentences, with breath interrupted, both continued to complain. Anton related his useless journey of a week. Must he perish from hunger? Soon the road would be full of beggars.

"You don't have meat every day."

"Still, if one had bread."

"True, if we only have bread!"

Their voices were lost; gusts of wind carried away the words with a plaintive moan.

"There's Monton," resumed the driver in a low voice, turning toward the south.

The man had started from Marchennes at 2 o'clock. He had walked with great strides, shivering beneath the thin lining of his velvet vest and fpanalons. A small bundle, tied up in a checked handkerchief, annoyed him greatly, and he rested it against his hips, sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other, to enable him to put both hands into the depths of his pockets at the same time, hands numbed and deprived of blood by the cutting east wind. A single thought occupied his mind—a mechanic without work and without home—the hope that the cold would be less severe after the break of day. For an hour and half he had proceeded in this manner, when, two kilometers from Monton, he perceived, on the left, some red fires, three braziers of glowing coal burning as if suspended in the open air. At first, through fear, he hesitated, then he could not resist the pitiful desire to warm his hands an instant.

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