

Where the Women Work in Coal Mines



THREE BELGIAN GIRLS LOADING BRICK.



BELGIAN GIRLS PUSHING COAL CARS

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WASMES, Belgium, Dec. 23.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—I am in the heart of one of the richest coal mining regions of Europe. Belgium is only about one-third the size of Indiana, but it has deposits of coal and iron which make it hum like a bee hive. It is the busiest workshop upon the continent, and it supports about as many people to the square mile as any country of the world. Its annual product of coal amounts to 22,000,000 tons. It uses the greater part of this at home, and also imports fuel from Germany and England. At present the people are looking to the United States as a possible source of manufacturing fuel, and the day may yet come when the mills here will be largely run through coal from the United States.

The Belgium mining conditions are entirely different from those of our country. Our mines are near the surface, and it costs but little to get the coal to the cars. Those of Belgium are far down under the earth, and every ton has to be lifted by machinery to the surface. Some of the mines which I visited today are more than a half mile deep. The water has to be fought at every turn, and mighty pumps are employed to keep the works dry. There are tunnels cutting the earth this way and that at a depth of 2,000 feet. Over them are other tunnels, and the whole country is a catacomb, made by getting out the coal. The mines have to be timbered. The wood is cut from the forests nearby, but the most of it is not over six inches thick, and as it comes to the mines it looks like telegraph poles, each fifty feet long, tapering to a point at the end. Such timber stands in great stacks about each mine. It is unloaded from the cars by women, who handle the poles like so many Amazons.

This coal region is far different from those of Pennsylvania, Ohio or Tennessee. There it is mountainous. Here at Wasmes the land is flat, and the only elevations are from the dumps of the mines. The coal here is filled with waste. It has to be sorted and the refuse is carried out upon cars. There is so much of it that a pyramidal mountain soon rises up beside each mine, standing out like a black cone against the blue sky. There are such pyramids everywhere in this part of Belgium. Some of them are dead, the mines which produced them having been worked out and abandoned. Others have ladders up their backs and a framework on the top where women push the cars along and with a rattling sound empty them. Some of the pyramids are smoking. There is much sulphur in the coal and spontaneous combustion often starts a fire which burns on for years. Instances are known of people going to sleep on the dumps and being suffocated by the fumes and gases.

Take your stand with me on one of these coal mountains just outside the mining town of Wasmes and look about you. See the farms covered with rich crops, with these coal mounds rising above them. There is one at our right with great bug-like bags crawling over it. Take your field glass and look at them. They are not bags. They are women who are picking up the coal that has been left in the waste. There comes a car along the coal mountain. Two women are pushing it and with the glass you can almost see their muscles swell as with bare arms they cast it on the dump.

Now look at that mound at the left. It is hundreds of feet high, and, like the others about it, is an evidence of the enormous waste that the miners have to contend with. Every bit of coal that is brought to the surface has to be picked over, and the waste is evidently more than the coal itself.

Near every mound you see the huge buildings of the coal workers. They are not unlike those of the United States, but the scenes about them are different.

In the United States the work is done altogether by men. Here most of the labor above the surface is performed by women. And such women! Lusty young girls of



IN WASMES, A BELGIAN MINING TOWN.

from 16 to 20. Pretty girls! rosy cheeks! round armed and plump, with faces smutty with coal dust, but at the same time comely! Their eyes are bright and their beauty is accentuated by the coal dust on their faces through which the red flames forth like that of the dark moss rose. They are very tiger lilies set in a background of black diamonds.

Come with me and let us visit one of the mines. We enter the great work where the mighty shaft is jerking up and down raising the coal to the surface. At the mouth of the opening stand a half dozen of these Belgian girls, their heads done up in blue and white handkerchief turbans, their sleeves rolled up high above the elbows and their shapely ankles plainly showing between the ends of their skirts and their white wooden clogs. See them grasp that car as the engine stops and shove it over the rails to where it is to be dumped for the sorters. As they do so another gang of girls takes their places to handle the next car and others shoot the empties back to the other side of the shaft. There is no fooling about this. The women work like bees, and with the strength of horses. They do more than the men, and they are, I am told, more conscientious in their work.

Leave the shaft and come with me to the sorters. The coal rolls down a chute into the cars. Women stand at the side of the chute and help it onward with hoes. Girls of 14 or 20 sit further down picking the refuse and slate out of the coal with their hands. Still further on there are more turbaned, bare-armed maidens, sooty and dirty, working away as fast as their fingers can move, and in the railroad car itself, into which the coal drops, there are other women hoeing the coal this way and that, sorting the waste. All the work is done by the piece, and the girls are paid in proportion to the amount they perform. I asked as to the wages, and was told that the rate is 2 cents a basket, and that the best workers can pick about a basket and a half every hour, thus earning as much as 30 cents in their day of twelve hours.

And still the women miners of Belgium are far better off today than they have ever been in the past. Their condition has been notoriously bad. For a long time little children were employed in the mines. They were harnessed in carts and coal cars with straps and chains so that they crawled along on their hands and knees dragging the coal to the mouth of the shaft. Now women under 21 are prohibited by law from working underground, and hence those whom you see on the surface are young girls. They could get better wages down below, and many of them will leave the surface work and go into the mines as soon as they are old enough.

As a result, the surface girls are not bent and broken, and those I saw were as well developed physically as the prize golf girls

of the United States. And still they were tolling like so many horses, pushing the cars this way and that. Some were lifting great lumps of coal weighing from fifteen to twenty pounds each, and others were doing all sorts of work which in America would be done by men.

In one place a ditch was being dug and lined with brick and cement. A girl of 15 was mixing the mortar with a hoe, and a little further on at a brick pile three sturdy girls were loading bricks upon a wheelbarrow, which a fourth girl pushed upon the car when it was full. They were working hard, and the perspiration stood out in white beads upon their dusty faces. I took a photograph of them, and my heart came into my throat as they smiled.

I have said that the women who sort the coal earn about 30 cents a day. Some get less, but there are others who make as much as 40 cents, and in the mines they are paid as high as 46 cents. Men miners get 75 or 80 cents underground, and about 50 cents at the surface. Boys of 14 and 15 are paid 42 cents, and children about 20 cents and upward. Altogether, there are 124,000 miners in Belgium, and of them all I doubt whether 10 per cent make \$1 a day.

And still the Belgian working day averages from ten to twelve hours, and the average number of working days every year is more than 300. Low wages and long hours are the rule. There are 750,000 working people here, and of these nine-tenths work ten, eleven or more hours per day. Of all the workers one-fourth make less than 40 cents per day; one-fourth from 40 to 60 cents, and another fourth from 70 to 80 cents per diem.

Women are everywhere paid less than the men, and about half of the female workers make less than 30 cents a day, while in the whole country of more than 6,000,000, half of whom are women, only 395 women get as much as 80 cents a day.

Among the best-paid women here are those who work underground in the mines. The work is hard and degrading. It unsexes those who are thus working away day after day in the semi-darkness, and in time makes them animals. In old age they are little better than the horses and donkeys which work with them, and which stay in the mines until they die. Some of the horses will live from ten to twenty years after going down underground, but they become perfectly blind at the end of three years.

I have been interested in the life of the people. Every great mine has its dwelling houses built about it, a collection of little two-story bricks built together in blocks. Each house has five rooms, two on the ground floor, two above and a little attic under the roof. The families are large and the average number of children is six or seven. The miners are miserably poor. Nearly every one pays a rent of \$19 or \$20

a year for his home, but only the fewest save money. The people are great drinkers. In this region every third house is a saloon, and the most of the wages go for drinks. The people drink alcohol, and the women drink as well as the men.

Belgium spends more than eight times as much for liquor as it does for schools, and the average drink bill is about \$5 per head, or \$25 per family. I am surprised at the number of saloons. They are known as "estaminets," and you see them everywhere. There is hardly a block in the city without one or more, and they are scattered along the country roads. There are more than 200,000 saloons in Belgium, and it is said that one person in every thirty of the whole population is employed in selling intoxicating drinks.

Many of the workmen get drunk on Saturday and lay off over Monday. Similar conditions prevail in England, where drunkenness is, if anything, worse than here.

There are a number of workmen's associations in Belgium. The men have their trades unions and their co-operative societies. There is one kind of organization, known as "Mutualities," which has over 50,000 members. There are societies for mutual help so formed that the members support each other in times of trouble, providing medical attendance and other such things.

Many of the societies are protected by the government, and to some the state gives subsidies, increasing their funds for medical attendance and support in time of sickness. The state now has pensions for such workmen of over 65 who need them and also associations which insure the lives of workmen at low rates.

Belgium has a ministry of industry and labor which has to do with matters relating to workmen, and there is also what is known as the superior council of labor, organized to consider labor interests and prepare measures regulating them for presentation to parliament. This council is composed of sixteen workmen, sixteen manufacturers and sixteen scientists. It is said to be of great value to labor interests.

The governments are becoming more and more paternal in many of the European countries. They are taking the place of a father to the people and trying to benefit them in a variety of ways. In Belgium the state has erected dwellings for workmen in certain localities, and has arranged so that they can buy them on easy terms. It is helping the farming interests by schools of agriculture, and through its railroad service is reducing freights and facilitating the marketing. I have spoken of the postal arrangements of Switzerland and France, whereby the farmer can express his goods to consumers through the post-offices. Here in Belgium the government has put on fast trains for England for the shipment of dairy products. It facilitates the trade

and it seems to be on the outlook to help the producing classes.

I am surprised at the enormous manufacturing industry of Belgium. The country is a very beehive of work. It has about 6,000,000 people, and fully 750,000 of them are at work making something to sell. The factories are as thick as in the black country of England, and the land teems with house industry. There are about 26,000 workshops which employ on the average only three hands each, and an enormous amount of cotton and linen cloth is woven at home.

On the eastern edge of the Belgian coal field is Liege, which has 175,000 people, and which was built up out of manufactures of iron. It is the Sheffield of the country, making vast quantities of firearms for home use and export. It has 30,000 workmen, who make nothing but guns, and most of these work at their own homes. The manufacturer furnishes the material, and the workmen take it home and make the different parts of a gun. One man may be employed upon two locks, another on barrels, getting from 2 to 3 cents for his work on each gun. It is only recently that much machinery has been introduced, and this is used only with the cheaper kinds of firearms.

Parts of guns are also made for export. We get many of our steel gun barrels from Liege, and also the Damask gun barrels, which are made nowhere else in the world. The secret of making the Damask barrels is carefully guarded, being handed down from father to son. Only the most skilled of the workmen can make these barrels. The ordinary rough-bored barrels are turned out in great quantities; they cost from 60 to 70 cents apiece, when ready for export.

When the United States has finally settled its mining troubles our exporters can study the Belgian market with profit. This country imports something like 2,000,000 tons of coal a year, the most of it coming from France, Germany and England, and necessitating comparatively heavy freight charges. There are six lines of steamers sailing between Antwerp and the United States, and American coal should be landed there at low rates. The freight rates of the present are based upon the grain rates, and are consequently high.

The Belgium coal will not compare with the best grades of our coal. The anthracite here has not the hardness nor brilliancy of the Pennsylvania product, and it is lighter in weight. Some of the Belgian bituminous coal has 75 per cent slack, so that it is used for the making of briquettes rather than for export.

Some of the Belgium mines have given out, and, as the coal area is limited, the country will eventually have to import more than it does now. Not only here, but in all parts of Europe there should be a market for American coal, and if carefully nursed a business can be built up which will materially increase the balance of trade, which is already in our favor.

FRANK G. CARPENTER.

Rabbit Hunting

In January, says Country Life, bunny is to be found in bramble tangle and close-grown thickets, to be trapped out or run with beagles. When he is in mood for a run he will furnish a lively bit of entertainment. Those who love the music of the hunt find rare pleasure in listening to a brace of beagles as they unravel and bring to naught all the twists and turns and clever wiles of bunny. Indeed, not a few put their dogs in with no intention of killing the game, but for the pure delight of watching and hearing the dogs work. It sometimes seems as if the rabbit was aware of their peaceful intentions at these times, for he will play about in a small circle for half an hour or more before holding up, affording many opportunities to observe and study the ways of this long-legged little gray-coat. Indeed, he seems to quite enter into the spirit of the game, and a delightful winter's afternoon can be thus spent.