

Fast Falls the Eventide

by Keppiehed

It is the first day on the job for this unlucky man.

Fast Falls the Eventide

Chapter 1 of 1

It is the first day on the job for this unlucky man.

Prompt: "ember"

A/N: Winner for week #3 at Brigit's Flame! Please see the end for full author's notes on historical details. The frequent references to faith are due to the time period. The title is taken from the hymn "Abide with Me". Many thanks to Liefheil for the edit; any remaining continuity errors are my own.

George Hindmarsh mopped his brow and tried to work the kink out of his back. He felt like he'd been down in this miserable dark hole for years, but it wasn't even lunchtime yet. Or at least he didn't think it was. It was impossible to get his bearings in the preternatural dimness of the mine shaft. He might have been working for minutes or hours; he was disoriented and out of his element.

A passing worker laughed and clapped him on the back. "First day, right?"

George squinted, but he couldn't recognize the face. Everyone looked the same with coal dust smeared on them and helmets covering the rest.

"Nicholson. Joshua. Don't worry, you'll be right as rain in a few days. Follow me, I'll show you the ropes around here." The older man jerked his head to indicate that George should follow.

George nodded his thanks. "I'm Geo..."

"Oh, I know. I've seen you around, don't you know." It wasn't a question. Everyone knew each other in this little town.

George swallowed. They were heading down, always down; he could tell by the slant of the ground under his feet. Until today he'd had no idea the bowels of the earth were so fathomless. He'd never much considered the matter at all, to be honest. The open flames on the helmets didn't provide near enough light, as far as he was concerned, but he couldn't very well protest. This was his job now, and he had to get used to it. "How far are we going?"

"Miller's up here a ways. He's the stoneman, so we'll talk to him. Either one...they're brothers. Walter or William. Alright fellows. We'll find a place for you yet, Hindmarsh."

George had to strain to hear the other man, as he was talking with his head facing forward. It was probably a good thing that he kept his eyes on the path, with all of the boys scurrying past hauling buckets and tools and crates. It was crowded, but Nicholson negotiated the labyrinthine passages nimbly and George was hard-pressed to keep up. He supposed the grace of a miner would come with practice, although he dreaded the time it would take to wear him into the position.

"Miller!" Nicholson shouted over the din.

Whichever brother it was...Walter or William...he was a man in great demand, and there were several people lined up to speak to him. As they waited their turn, they leaned

against the wall. Nicholson reached into his pack and brought out an apple. "Want half?" he asked.

George was struck by the man's generosity. "No, thanks," he lied, his mouth watering. "I just ate."

"Sure," Nicholson replied, and bit into the fruit. "So, what brings you..."

He was interrupted by a shriek. George's heart leapt and a rush of adrenaline flooded his system. The high-pitched whine grew deafening, and he knew with automatic certainty that something terrible was happening. Time slowed to a near stop, and everyone was frozen in a bubble of surreality. George could only hear the same mantra playing in his brain: please God please God pleaseGodPleaseGod, but he didn't even know what he was praying for. He just knew something terrible was happening, and he was pinned with fear to the wall of the mine shaft, waiting for his doom to descend or pass him by.

The scream, which was louder than any man or woman could make, cut through the voices and the working, and everything fell silent as men's heads swiveled to the only way out...the source of the sound. A groan began, the groaning of metal under pressure and under siege, and then a terrible shaking boom. Something big had broken free and was falling.

George could feel the very earth tremble as whatever machinery had failed wreaked its havoc on the descent. In reality it must only have been seconds, but it felt like forever as he waited for the shaking to stop. He was deaf from the crashing, and then it was silent, more silent than he had ever witnessed. There was so much dust in the air, and they were ...

"Trapped!"

The shout was being passed along, man to man, down the tunnels and through the throngs.

Panic flared in George's breast. *Trapped*. The only word more deadly than that was fire. What would happen? He had to get out!

At least they had the light from the helmets to keep the darkness at bay. George let himself fall to the ground, his knees too weak to support him. Surely someone could begin rescue efforts. Surely they would be saved?

Nicholson collapsed next to him. "Dear God. My God ... have mercy, Oh Lord."

The sounds of prayer were all George could hear. For minutes or hours, he couldn't tell. One by one, lights on the helmets around him snuffed out. The darkness was blinding.

It was in the shadow of anonymity that George heard the crying start. It began as little whimpers and concealed snuffles, and then there were sobs. The sound of boys crying, and men right along with them nearly brought George to tears as well. Thank the good Lord he didn't have his boys with him. They were too young for this work. That was all he could thank God for on this terrible day.

"Hey now! Let's none of that!" a voice cried out. "Hope is not lost, not yet."

"Who ...?" George turned his head, but the darkness was so complete, he couldn't even see Nicholson next to him.

"It's Mr. Armour, the back-overman. Good man," Nicholson murmured.

The strains of a harmonica could be heard from far in the back tunnel somewhere. George recognized it as *Abide With Me*, one of his favorite hymns. Voices joined in one by one. By the time George was singing "The darkness deepens ... Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies ...", it sounded like every man and boy had added their voice to the song, and the melody echoed down the walls long after they sang the last note together.

"Well, now," Mr. Armour said to the group. "I suggest we have some semblance of order, to keep our mind off ... melancholy thoughts. I have a notebook here, and a pencil. I propose that I keep notes on our activities to get us through this trying time. Are there any suggestions as to what we can do? Please state your name and idea."

"James Watson. I would ask a prayer service of any man that would lead one."

"Noted, Mr. Watson," Mr. Armour called. "Is there any man here who is qualified to lead us in prayer?"

A throat cleared. "I'm Henry Younger. I'm not a man of the cloth, but I do have my bible, and I do know some verses. If you permit me to recite aloud what I remember, that could be close enough, and if any man would like to lay his hands on the Good Book, I will gladly pass it around."

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Younger, that will be most appreciated, unless there are any objections?"

There was nothing.

George recognized the voice of Henry Younger begin. "I ask that we bow our heads, as I have some sad news. Before the accident, I was working next to Old Man Fai...uh, William Fairbairn. As many of you know, he was quite advanced in age, and it seems that some falling debris hit him on the head. Mr. Fairbairn did not survive the accident. For his sake, and for those others that we don't yet know about, I ask you to recite the words of the Twenty-Third Psalm. The Lord is my Shepherd ..."

As George said the words that he'd said countless times before, he couldn't help but feel a prickle of unease. Would these words be said over him in a few days hence?

"... house of the Lord forever. Amen." Mr. Younger continued the service, but George couldn't concentrate on the soothing words. All he could think of was the air that tasted staler with every breath, the sound of a hundred other lungs breathing in the precious air, shallow and gasping. Each pull in was a lungful closer to their demise.

"That concludes the service, thank you." Mr. Armour's voice startled George. Had he been sleeping? He couldn't even tell in the dark.

The time passed by quickly or at a grind, it was impossible to know. The sound of scratching could be heard somewhere to George's right. "What's that? Who's there?" he asked.

"John Douglas," the man said. "I'm marking on my flask with my penknife. They'll never dig us out, you know, but I have to leave something for my Sarah, so she knows my last thoughts were of her." The scratching resumed.

George let his head fall back against the dirt wall. He dozed until he heard a buzz of voices. "What is it? What's going on?"

"They're saying it was the engine beam that broke. It wasn't an explosion at all; just that the brattice collapsed under the weight of the beam snapping. It destroyed the shaft on the way down."

George's mouth fell open. "But that's ... that's impossible! It *has* to be methane or coal damp. That beam weighs forty-three tons!"

Nicholson laughed, but it was bitter. "Well, that means that half that beam...twenty-one tons...fell through that shaft, demolishing it and sealing us in. I hope you made your peace, Hindmarsh, because this is where you meet your Maker."

George's heart fluttered. He wasn't ready! Would he ever be? He wasn't sure, but certainly not now, not like this, not entombed alive underground with hundreds of men he didn't know!

"Please, your attention!" Mr. Armour's voice cut through the growing panic. "It has come to my attention that our circumstances are dire. I suggest that we gather our personal belongings and make a pile here. Pass them forward. If you have anything to give a loved one as a final remembrance, they will be able to better find it here."

"Can we light a fag, Sir?" a voice yelled, followed by nervous laughter.

"Smoke if you got 'em, boys. You can't take 'em with you," Mr. Armour replied.

George could hear chuckling, as people shifted through their pockets. Little sparks lit the depths as matches flared to life, bringing welcome heat and visual stimulation with them. George reveled in the simple beauty of a single flame before they died out too soon.

Nicholson nudged him in the ribs. "I've got two left; you want one?" he offered.

"No, no ... go ahead," George demurred. He wasn't the type to take a dying man's last few cigarettes from him.

"Hey, listen. Nothing better than having a smoke with your buddy. If that's the last thing I get to do in this world, then let's do this thing right."

George felt a glow of pleasure. "Alright, then." He fumbled for the proffered fag, and he didn't waste the lighting of it. He savored the inhale and tried to hold onto the smoke as long as he could, but it went all too quickly. George was as starved for light as anything else, and his hungry eyes feasted on the glowing embers at the tip. He watched long past when he could get a pull from the fag; he kept his eyes on the joint until it extinguished in his hand, dead and cold. The sight of the last tinder of tobacco growing ashy left an empty place in his chest.

"I am feeling a little light-headed," Mr. Armour announced. His voice was fainter than it had been. "I shall make this my last entry. The Gledsons are quite ill, as are some others of you. That is all I have the strength for. I wish you all the courage in your journey, and I rest assured that we shall be reunited, as God sees fit. I bid you Godspeed, brothers."

The silence was now ominous instead of companionable. George could hear hushed crying from some places, prayers in others. "Daddy, I'm scared!" rang out, but that was the only time he heard a shout break free.

George couldn't quite believe that this would be the end; it was a tight spot, but this couldn't be how he died. Death was so ... final. Sure, he'd thought about it plenty of times, but he was surprised to find how unprepared he was to be at this moment. There was no comfort here. George was waiting for a calm to descend, for God to show him that all those Sundays would be rewarded now. There was nothing, no inner light, and certainly no outer one to guide him home. He didn't feel cheated, he felt ... a void. So this couldn't be the end.

It wasn't fair for the others who'd died here, but he was sure that they'd found the comfort in their final moments that he was missing now. George settled in and tried to ignore the rasping in his chest. He pictured his parents and their careworn faces, but the images wouldn't stick. He knew he had to concentrate on something. His children, surely his children would bring him solace. Mary Ann, so like her mother, William, his first son, Jane and Stephen.

It was Mary on whom his thoughts rested. Mary, the girl he'd always loved. She was full with another child now. His time couldn't be up. She needed him. It was for her that he was down in this wretched place, for love of her. She wouldn't stop crying, and he never could stand to see the tears in those eyes. Even after all these years, the cornflower blue of them still took his breath away. What he wouldn't give to bury his hands in her hair right now. It always came apart like cornsilk, right in his fingers. He loved the feel of it, and sometimes he would press a fistful to his nose and just sit there, breathing in the scent of her. She would laugh at him, but there was nothing in the whole world like his Mary. Never had been. She was crying now, and he hated the sound. She was gasping for air through the tears, and he wanted to reach out and touch her, but he couldn't see her. Where was she?

"Mary?" he called, and there she was, just ahead of him. The light was shining on her hair, giving her a halo like it did on those bright spring days when he would call her his angel and she would smile. She wasn't laughing now, though, she was gasping for breath, and he wanted to tell her not to cry anymore, it would be okay, it would all be okay as soon as he could touch her hand. She kept moving just out of reach ...

Finally, George could reach her, and she pulled him up, up, up into the sunlight with her, and he couldn't even remember what they'd been so unhappy about. Everything was going to be just fine.

A/N: January 16, 1862 marked a catastrophic coal-mining accident in English history. The Hartley Colliery Disaster remains one of the worst tragedies, even by Victorian-era standards, when accidents were commonplace. The loss of life was extreme, and the death toll stood at 204 men and boys, who all died not from an explosion, as was standard, but because of suffocation. It caused a change in laws to the mining industry, requiring a double shaft for emergency exits. All the names in this story were from real people who were casualties of the accident, and the events were as historically accurate as I could make them (of course, conversations are my own fancy). A prayer meeting was held, and belongs were found, with inscriptions in tin flasks reading "Mercy, O God" and "Friday afternoon. My Dear Sarah...I leave you." Fathers were found with sons in their arms, and whole families died together down in the shaft. A memorial stands today at St. Alban's church in Earsdon.