

IT WAS A FRIGHTFUL PLUNGE

How a Mechanic Slipped and Fell Into an Enormous Acid Tank.

In looking for material from which to construct a story of adventure one need not travel to the wild western mountains of our continent, or to the frigid neighborhood of the north pole, nor yet to the jungles of the tropical regions. One may encounter in any great city adventures and hair-breadth escapes enough to supply material for all the stories of that character the people of the world would care to read in a century.

Workshop and factory furnish daily their quota of narrow escapes from death. Trolley cars, grade crossings, and runaway horses cause the wary to be ever on guard against accident, and life itself at times seems to have no claims to recognition in this great overgrown city of the west.

One frightful plunge that I unwittingly took occurred in the heart of the manufacturing district of Chicago and although the fall was only of a few feet the memory of it will go with me to my grave.

I am employed as "all-round" man at one of the largest chemical works in the country. An "all-round man" is one who must know how to do everything, do iron and wood work, run a lathe, take anyone's place who is sick, set up machinery, sew belts, mend everything that is broken, be it brass, wood, iron, steel, or tin. He must understand coopering, millwrighting, carpentering, time-keeper, and in fact know all that everybody else in the place knows, and still know a good many things on his own account.

About two months since I was called into the acid room of our factory to sew a belt which runs from one line of shafting to another just over a large tank used to hold sulphuric acid, or, as it is usually called, "oil of vitriol." I took a ladder and board, and climbing to the top I placed the board across the tank, which was nearly full of liquid, being about six feet deep. As I looked down into its placid but treacherous depths and saw my face reflected some four yards below I shuddered to think what a horrible fate it would be for a person to fall into it.

Nearly everybody has read of the effects of the acids on the flesh, but very few know what a delicious feeling of warmth occurs immediately after it touches the skin. This feeling of warmth, though, increases so rapidly that a blister will appear in less than a dozen seconds unless water, which is the best thing, as it is always at hand, is instantly applied. To take my choice, though, of fire, hot water, or vitriol I had rather be burned with the latter, and I have tried them all; for as soon as applied and the stuff is removed all pain subsides, although the part may be badly blistered. The vitriol seems to deaden the nerves of sensation completely, while a burn from fire smarts and smarts, and when you think it is going to let up and give one a rest smarts some more, and this keeps up for about forty-eight hours. But everybody knows how that is, and also remembers how, when a little kid—, I mean small boy or girl, as the case may be, your mother—God bless her innocent but misguided heart—would take you when you had burned your finger, and leading you up to the hot stove would apply the doctrine of "similia similibus curantur," by holding your poor, little digit so near the hot iron that you would scream with the pain. "Drawing the fire out" she called it, but for my part I always thought, and do yet, that the fire had better stay in if it hurt that bad to draw it out.

But to get back to that belt. I soon had the holes punched, and with the rawhide string in my hand I worked rapidly, holding in the two ends of the belt in one hand and lacing through the holes with the other. The fumes of different acids, nitric, sulphuric, and muriatic, as well as other chemicals arose around me and greeted my nostrils with a, to me, not unpleasant pungency. I had just pulled the string through four holes I remember when I inadvertently stepped on one edge of the plank on which I was standing. It tipped over a little. I stepped quickly the other way and it righted itself, but I had lost my balance. I caught hold of the belt to save myself and almost succeeded in standing erect when to my horror the lacing commenced to slip through the holes. I jerked and pulled and tugged, trying to catch hold of the other end of the belt, but I could not. Slowly the string slipped through the holes, and slowly, slowly my body, outstretched, with my feet yet on the board, sank toward the depths of corrosive, poisonous stuff beneath me.

Down, down, I went, to sure death. Down, down, to suffer the most horrible agony for a few seconds and then all would be over. The string slipped with a slow but sure deliberation that intensified the torture I endured a thousandfold. Was there no escape? Was I to sink gradually down into that 5,000 gallons of vitriol and thus meet the most horrible death known? I thought of my dear wife and the little ones at home, how they would come to the door to meet "papa" with a kiss, while he was lying at the bottom of that vat or was held in nauseous solution by the powerful acid. As my mind reached that point I made one more effort to regain my footing. I shrieked in terror as the string slipped from the last hole, and I dropped with a splash. I gave one despairing yell and then I felt that pleasant, warm sensation spreading over me, and I knew that all was over, as consciousness was mercifully taken from me.

After a time, I did not know just then how long, I heard a child's prattle and felt a little hand patting my face. As I opened my eyes little Katie said:

"Papa dun woked up now."

I was at home in my own bed, where I had been brought after my plunge. Little Katie was sitting on the bed beside me and my darling wife was sitting on a chair holding my hand. My limbs were a little stiff and sore, and turning I asked in a voice which quivered in spite of me:

"Mollie, am I very badly burned?"

"Oh, no I not at all," she replied.

"Why, how is that?" I asked. "I remember falling into the vat of acid before I fainted, and it is most miraculous that I was gotten out before I was dead, not to mention burnt."

She could scarcely repress a smile as she answered: "Why Henry, there was not a bit of acid in the tank, so the boys told me who brought you home. It had been washed out and filled with warm water, so as to be clean, in order to mend a leak in it."

I set 'em up when I returned to the shop.

The Panama Canal.

Viscount Ferdinand de Lesseps celebrated his 87th birthday on Sunday. Ten years ago he was one of the greatest living Frenchmen. Twenty years ago he would have been named instantly as one of the half-dozen most conspicuous men of the century. Emperors, queens and princes assembled to do him honor 23 years ago last Thursday, when the Suez Canal was formally opened. Now he is on the point of being the best-hated man in Europe. If the coming investigation into Panama Canal affairs proves that he has winked at the stupendous frauds which have been going on the bourgeois and small capitalists who have been ruined through him will make it unsafe for him to appear on the streets. Up to the middle of 1886 \$154,500,000 had been spent on the Panama Canal and it was estimated that it would cost about as much more to complete it. An attempt to raise subscriptions for nearly that amount failed and the company suspended payments. The French Government appointed administrators and confidence was renewed to such an extent that large sums were raised by subscription. In December, 1890, an arrangement was effected with the Columbian Government, by parties interested in the canal, in accordance with which the time allowed for its completion was extended for a further period of ten years, on the understanding that a new company should be formed to take over the entire assets of the old one and that the work of construction should be actively resumed before February 28, 1893. Now it is estimated by the suspiciously-optimized official receiver that the work can be completed for \$36,000,000—a sum probably too low by half, yet so small in comparison with the amount already expended that it is hardly conceivable that the enterprise should be given up and the money already sunk allowed to sink completely out of reach.

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