Deep Down

A TALE OF THE CORNISH MINES

by
R. M. Ballantyne

Introduction

Deep Down is a novel of a kind rarely encountered: although peppered with colorful characters (the smuggler Jim Cuttance, the putative hero-doctor Oliver Trembath, the scheming George Augustus Clearemout, *etc*.) the true protagonist is not a person but a thing: the Botallack tin and copper mine located in extreme south-western Cornwall not far from Land's End; the mine's influence implicitly and explicitly pervades the book.

A popular form of fiction is the historical novel, in which the action occurs at some time in the past. *Deep Down* exposes the weakness of most modern efforts in that style, in which so often the action is set against only a weak backdrop of strictly limited fidelity to life as it was actually lived. In other words, most "historical novels" are really contemporary novels with occasional nods to the era in which the action occurs. In *Deep Down*, the historical setting is pervasive; it is no mere backdrop to the action, but for much of the novel it *is* the action.

The cynic may suggest that this is because this novel is quite old (it was first published in 1868), so that a "contemporary" novel of that era would now be read as an historical one. That may be true, but it is not the reason for the authentic nature of this book. Throughout *Deep Down*, Ballantyne makes reference to the fact that he is writing historically, and that some of the practices described are no longer extant (*i.e.*, at the time at which Ballantyne wrote the novel). So it is truly an "historical novel" — not just in our day but also in Ballantyne's; yet it is one in which the reader is immersed to an almost unprecedented degree in the period in which the novel is set.

Unlike most authors of his time, Ballantyne was (usually) meticulous in his research. For *Deep Down* he spent time in the St. Just area

of west Cornwall, understanding the life of the Cornish tin miner — a fact that becomes obvious as the extraordinary details unfold in *Deep Down*.

Ballantyne's grasp of the life of the Cornish miner is indeed extraordinary. Adits, winzes, engine houses, all the paraphernalia of the mining industry are described and explained in detail, as are the hazards and living conditions of those employed in the industry. Indeed, the student of the Cornish mining industry is likely to find more detailed information about the subject in this work of fiction than in many an encyclopedia.

Ballantyne's powers of observation are not limited to the one industry: he also (although in much less detail) describes pilchard fishing, and even the life of the Wesleyan local preacher (which remains in recognizable form today). He accurately reproduces the dialect of west Cornwall. Even today remnants of this speech remain in the area, although its use has declined greatly in the last generation; we are most likely in the last few decades in which words such as "gurt", "scat", "'ee" and their ilk may be heard in common speech.

Botallack Mine, the hero and sometimes-villain of this tale, is a real mine; at least, there is a village called Botallack, and it is located in a mining district that shares its name. Nowadays the difference between a mine and a particular shaft is often blurred, so that any shaft with an engine house is often referred to as a mine. "Botallack Mine" is generally understood historically to refer to a district that encompasses Wheal Owles ("wheal" is the Cornish word for "mine"), Crowns Mine, Wheal Cock, Wheal Edward and others. "Botallack Mine" (or simply "Botallack") as it is used nowadays usually means the Crowns Mine, whose engine houses sit on the cliffs and whose levels extend far out under the sea, exactly as described in *Deep Down*. These engine houses form the basis for the cover of this book.

The mining industry has (essentially) departed west Cornwall, although there are occasional attempts to revive it. Certainly its glory days are long gone, the most obvious reminder of those days being the engine house ruins that dot the landscape of the area, giving it a unique picturesque character. In 2006, this led to the landscape of west Cornwall being declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Beautiful now, but once the visual indication of a hard life indeed, lived far below the grass and the waves.

We hope that you enjoy this unique book.

— Engine House Books
August, 2010

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CONTINUES TO TREAT OF SPIRITS, AND SHOWS THE VALUE OF HOSPITALITY

Having accomplished the feat narrated in the last chapter Maggot proceeded with his friend towards the town. On their way they had to pass the mouth of an old shaft in which both of them chanced to be much interested at that time, inasmuch as it contained the produce of a recent smuggling expedition on a large scale, consisting of nearly a hundred tubs of brandy. The liquor had been successfully brought ashore and concealed in the mine, and that night had been fixed on for its removal. Mules had been provided, and about fifty men were appointed to meet at a certain spot, at a fixed hour, to carry the whole away into the neighbouring towns.

Maggot and his comrade began to converse about the subject that was uppermost in their minds, and the former increased his pace, when John Cock drew his attention to the fact that the sun was getting low.

"The boys will be mustering now," said John, "an' them theere daws have kep' us late enough already."

"They do say that the boatsmen are informed about the toobs," observed Maggot.

"More need to look alive," said John.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Maggot suddenly; "there's some wan in the shaft!"

He pointed to a neighbouring mound of rubbish, on which, just as he spoke, a man made his appearance.

Without uttering a word the smugglers sauntered towards the mound, assuming a careless air, as though they were passing that way

by chance. On drawing near they recognised Ebenezer Trezise, the coastguard-man.

"Good-hevening, sur," said Maggot; "semmen as if you'd found a keenly lode."

"Why, iss, we've diskivered a noo vein," said Trezise with a sly smile, "and we're sinkin' a shaft here in the hope o' raisin' tin, or *somethin'*."

"Ha! hope you'll let John an' me have a pitch in the noo bal, won't 'ee?" said Maggot with a laugh.

"Oh, cer'nly, cer'nly," replied the boatsman; "if you'll lend us a hand to sink the shaft. You appear to have been in the water, and 'twill warm 'ee."

"No, thank 'ee," replied Maggot; "I've bin stroobin' a daw's nest under cliff, an' I fell into the say, so I'm goin' hum to dry myself, as I'm afeared o' kitchin' cold, being of a delikit constitootion. But I'll p'raps lend thee a hand afterwards."

Maggot nodded as he spoke, and left the place at a slow saunter with his comrade, followed by the thanks and good-wishes of the boatsman, who immediately returned to the laborious task of clearing out the old shaft.

"They've got the scent," said Maggot when out of earshot; "but we'll do 'em yet. Whenever thee gets on the leeside o' that hedge, John, do 'ee clap on all sail for Balaswidden, where the boys are waitin', an' tell 'em to be ready for a call. I'll send Zackey, or wan o' the child'n to 'ee."

John went off on his errand the moment he was out of sight of the boatsmen, and Maggot walked smartly to his cottage.

"Owld ooman," he said, commencing to unbutton his wet garments, "do 'ee git ready a cup o' tay, as fast as you can, lass; we shall have company to-night."

"Company!" exclaimed Mrs. Maggot in surprise; "what sort o' company?"

"Oh! the best, the best," said Maggot with a laugh; "boatsmen no less — so look sharp. Zackey booy, come here."

Zackey put down the unfortunate black kitten (which immediately sought comfort in repose) and obeyed his father's summons, while his

mother, knowing that her husband had some plot in his wise head, set about preparing a sumptuous meal, which consisted of bread and butter, tea and fried mackerel, and Cornish pasty.

"Zackey, my son," said Maggot while he continued his toilet.

"Iss, father."

"I want 'ee to come down to the owld shaft with me, an' when I give 'ee the ward cut away as hard as thee legs can spank to Balaswidden, an' fetch the lads that are theere to the owld shaft. They knaw what to do, but tell 'em to make so little noise as they can. Dost a hear, my son?"

"Iss, faither," replied Zackey, with a wink of such profound meaning that his sire felt quite satisfied he was equal to the duty assigned him.

"Now, doan't 'ee wag tongue more than enough," continued Maggot; "and go play with the chet till I'm ready."

The urchin at once descended like a thunderbolt on the black kitten, but that marvellous animal had succeeded in snatching five minutes' repose, which seemed to be amply sufficient to recruit its energies, for it began instantly to play — in other words to worry and scratch the boy's hand — with the utmost glee and good-humour.

In a few minutes Maggot and his son went out and hastened to the old shaft, where they found the boatsmen still hard at work with pick and shovel clearing away the rubbish.

"You haven't found a bunch o' copper yet, I dessay?" said Maggot with a grin.

"No, not yet, but we shan't be long," replied Eben Trezise with a knowing smile.

"It's warm work," observed Maggot, as he looked down the hole, and saw that what the boatsman said was true, and that they would not be long of reaching the spot where the liquor had been concealed.

Trezise admitted that it *was* warm work, and paused to wipe his heated brow.

"I wish we had a drop o' water here," he said, looking up.

"Ha!" exclaimed Maggot; "not much chance o' findin' water in *that* hole, I do think — no, nor brandy nuther."

"Not so sure o' that," said Trezise, resuming his work.

"Now, et *is* a shame to let 'ee die here for want of a drop o' water," said Maggot in a compassionate tone; "I'll send my booy hum for some."

The boatsmen thanked him, and Zackey was ordered off to fetch a jug of water; but his father's voice arrested him before he had gone a hundred yards.

"Hold on a bit, my son. — P'raps," he said, turning to Trezise, "you'd come up hum with me and have a dish o' tay? Missus have got it all ready."

The invitation appeared to gratify the boatsmen, who smiled and winked at each other, as though they thought themselves very clever fellows to have discovered the whereabouts of a hidden treasure, and to be refreshed in the midst of their toil by one whom they knew to be a noted smuggler, and whom they strongly suspected of being concerned in the job they were at that time endeavouring to frustrate. Throwing down their tools they laughingly accepted the invitation, and clambered out of the shaft.

"Now's your time," whispered Maggot with a nod to his hopeful son, and then added aloud—

"Cut away, Zackey booy, an' tell mother to get the tay ready. Run, my son, let us knaw what thee legs are made of."

"He's a smart lad," observed Trezise, as Zackey gave his father an intelligent look, and dashed away at the top of his speed.

"Iss, a clever cheeld," assented Maggot.

"Bin down in the mines, I dessay?" said Trezise.

"Iss, oh iss; he do knaw tin," replied Maggot with much gravity.

In a few minutes the two coastguard-men were seated at Mrs. Maggot's well-supplied board, enjoying the most comfortable meal they had eaten for many a day. It was seasoned, too, with such racy talk, abounding in anecdote, from Maggot, and such importunate hospitality on the part of his better half, that the men felt no disposition to cut it short. Little Grace, too, was charmingly attentive, for she, poor child, being utterly ignorant of the double parts which her parents were playing, rejoiced, in the native kindliness of her heart, to see them all so happy. Even the "chet" seemed to enter into the spirit of what was going on, for, regardless of the splendid opportunity that

now presented itself of obtaining repose to its heart's content, that black ball of concentrated essence of mischief dashed wildly about the floor and up the bed-curtains, with its back up and its tail thickened, and its green eyes glaring defiance at everything animate, inanimate, or otherwise, insomuch that Maggot made sundry efforts to quell it with the three-legged stool — and Mrs. Maggot followed suit with a dish-clout — but in vain!

Meanwhile, men and mules and horses were converging by many paths and lanes towards the old shaft, and the shaft itself was apparently endued with the properties of a volcano, for out of its mouth issued a continuous shower of dust and stones, while many stalwart arms laid bare the mine beneath, and tossed up the precious "tubs" of brandy.

Before the pleasant little tea-party in Maggot's cottage broke up the whole were scattered abroad, and men and mules and horses sped with their ill-gotten gains across the furze-clad moors.

"Sure it's early to break up," said Maggot, when the boatsmen at last rose to take their leave; "there's no fear o' the bunches o' copper melting down there, or flyin' away."

"There's no saying," replied Eben Trezise; "you've heerd as well as we of lodes takin' the bit in their teeth an' disappearing — eh?"

"Well, iss, so they do sometimes; I'll not keep 'ee longer; good-hevenin' to 'ee," said Maggot, going outside the door and wishing them all manner of success as they returned to the old shaft.

Reader, shall we follow the two knowing fellows to that shaft? Shall we mark the bewildered expression of amazement with which they gazed into it, and listen to the wild fiendish laugh of mingled amusement and wrath that bursts from them in fitful explosions as the truth flashes into their unwilling minds? No; vice had triumphed over virtue, and we deem it a kindness to your sensitive nature to draw a veil over the scene of her discomfiture.