



10.2.36

M. sent me across to Wigan to see Joe Kennan, [1] an electrician who takes a prominent part in the Socialist movement. Kennan also lives in a decent Corporation house (Beech Hill Building Estate) but is more definitely a working man. A very short, stout, powerful man with an extraordinarily gentle, hospitable manner and very anxious to help. His elder child was upstairs in bed (scarlet fever suspected) the younger on the floor playing with soldiers and a toy cannon. Kennan smiles and says, "You see – and I'm supposed to be a pacifist." He sent me to the N. U. W. M. [2] shelter with a letter to the secretary asking him to find me a lodging in Wigan. The shelter is a dreadful ramshackle little place but a godsend to these unemployed men as it is warm and there are newspapers etc. there. The secretary, Paddy Grady, an unemployed miner. A tall lean man about 35, intelligent and well-informed and very anxious to help. He is a single man getting 17/- bob° [= shillings] a week and is in a dreadful state physically from the years of underfeeding and idleness. His front teeth are almost entirely rotted away. All the men at the N. U. W. M. very friendly and anxious to supply me with information as soon as they heard I was a writer and collecting facts about working-class conditions. I cannot get them to treat me precisely as an equal, however. They call me either "Sir" or "Comrade."

[1] Joe Kennan: at the time an unemployed coal miner an activist in the Independent Labour Party. He found Orwell lodgings with John and Lily Anderton (Mr and Mrs Hornby in this diary). For a valuable interview with Joe Kennan, see Orwell Remembered (pp. 130-3).

[2] N. U. W. M.: National Unemployed Workers Movement.

11.2.36

Staying at 72 Warrington Lane, Wigan. [1] Board and lodging 25/- a week. Share room with another lodger (unemployed railwayman), meals in kitchen and wash at scullery sink. Food all right but indigestible and in monstrous quantities. Lancashire method of eating tripe (cold with vinegar) horrible.

The family. Mr Hornby, aged 39, has worked in the pit since he was 13. Now out of work for nine months. A largish, fair, slow-moving, very mild and nice-mannered man who considers carefully before he answers when you ask him a question, and begins, "In my estimation." Has not much accent. Ten years ago he got a spurt of coal dust in his left eye and practically lost the sight of it. Was put to work "on top" for a while but went back to the pit as he could earn more there. Nine months ago his other eye went wrong (there is something called "nyastygmus" or some such name that miners suffer from) and he can only see a few yards. Is on "compensation" of 29/- a week, but they are talking of putting him on "partial compensation" of 14/- a week. It all depends whether the doctor passes him as fit for work, though of course there would not be any work, expect perhaps a job "on top," but there are very few of these. If he is put on partial compensation he can draw dole until his stamps are exhausted.

Mrs Hornby. Four years older than her husband. Less than 5 feet tall. Toby-jug figure. Merry disposition. Very ignorant – adds up 27 and 10 and makes it 31. Very broad accent. There seems to be 2 ways of dealing with the “the” here. Before consonants it is often omitted altogether (“put joog on table,” etc.) before vowels it is often incorporated with the word. eg. “My sister’s in thospital” – th as in thin.

The son “our Joe,” just turned 15 and has been working in the pit a year. At present is on night shift. Goes to work about 9 pm returns between 7 and 8 am, has breakfast and promptly goes to bed in bed vacated by another lodger. Usually sleeps till 5 or 6pm. He started work on 2/8 a day, was raised to 3/4, ie. £ a week. Out of this 1/8 a week comes off for stoppages (insurance etc.) and 4d a day for his tram fares to and from the pit. So his net wage, working full time, is 16/4 a week. In summer, however, he will only be working short-time. A tallish, frail, deadly pale youth, obviously much exhausted by his work, but seems fairly happy.

Tom, Mrs Hornby’s cousin, unmarried and lodging there – paying 25/- a week. A very hairy man with a hare-lip, mild disposition and very simple. Also on night shift.

Joe, another lodger, single. Unemployed on 17/- a week. Pays 6/- a week for his room and sees to his own food. Gets up about 8 to give his bed up to “our Joe” and remains out of doors, in Public Library etc., most of the day. A bit of an ass but has some education and enjoys a resounding phrase. Explaining why he never married, he says portentously, “Matrimonial chains is a big item.” Repeated this sentence a number of times, evidently having an affection for it. Has been totally unemployed for 7 years. Drinks when he gets the chance, which of course he never does nowadays.

The house has two rooms and scullery downstairs, 3 rooms upstairs, tiny back yard and outside lavatory. No hot water laid on. Is in bad repair – front wall is bulging. Rent 12/- and with rates 14/-.

The total income of the Hornbys is:

Mr Hornby’s compensation	29/- a week
Joe’s wages	16/4 ”
Tom’s weekly payment	25/- ”
Joe’s ditto	6/- ”
Total.....	£3-14-4. [2]

Payment of rent and rates leaves £3-2-4. This has to feed 4 people and clothe and otherwise provide for 3.* Of course at present there is my own contribution as well but that is an abnormality.

Wigan in the centre does not seem as bad as it has been represented – distinctly less depressing than Manchester. Wigan Pier said to have been demolished. Clogs commonly worn here and general in the smaller places outside such as Hindley. Shawl over head commonly worn by older women, but girls evidently only do it under pressure of dire poverty. Nearly everyone one sees very badly dressed and youths on the corners markedly less smart and rowdy than in London, but no very obvious signs of poverty except the number of empty shops. One in three of registered workers said to be unemployed.

Last night to Co-Op hall with various people from the N. U. W. M. to hear Wal Hannington [3] speak. A poor speaker, using all the padding and clichés of the Socialist orator, and with the wrong kind of cockney accent (once again, though a Communist entirely a bourgeois), but he got the people well worked up. Was surprised by the amount of Communist feeling here. Loud cheers when Hannington

announced that if England and U.S.S.R went to war U.S.S.R would win. Audience very rough and all obviously unemployed (about 1 in 10 of them women) but very attentive. After the address a collection taken for expenses – hire of hall and H.'s train-fare from London. £1-6-0 raised, not bad from about 200 unemployed people.

You can always tell a miner by the blue tattooing of coal dust on the bridge of his nose. Some of the older men have their foreheads veined with it like Roquefort cheese.

* The H.s are well-off by local standards [Orwell's handwritten footnote].

[1] Warrington Lane: illustrated in Peter Lewis, *George Orwell: The Road to 1984* (1981, p.50. Wigan Pier is illustrated on the same page.)

[2] The total income of the Hornbys is roughly equivalent to £150 today.

[3] Wal Hannington: (1896 – 1996), a leader of the NUWM and author of *Unemployed Struggles 1919-1936* and *The Problem of Distressed Areas*, published by the Left Book Club in November 1937. Like *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which preceded it, it had a centre section of thirty-two plates. Reg Reynolds, one of Orwell's pacifist friends, writing of his sympathy with the Hunger Marchers, observed that when they arrived at Hyde Park Corner, London, they 'did not look at all hungry – least of all that stout Communist, Wal Hannington, who led them' (*My Life and Crimes*, 1996, p. 106). Hannington also wrote the useful *Mr Chairman! A Short Guide to the Conduct and Procedure of Meetings* (1950). The £1-6-0 raised is equivalent to 312 pence – by an audience of about 200, so about a penny-ha'penny from each person on average.

12.2.36

Terribly cold. Long walk along the canal (one-time site of Wigan Pier) towards some slag-heaps in the distance. Frightful landscape of slag-heaps and belching chimneys. Some of the slag-heaps almost like mountains – one just like Stromboli. Bitter wind. They had had to send a steamer to break the ice in front of the coal barges on the canal. The bargemen were muffled to the eyes in sacks. All the "flashes" (stagnant pools made by the subsidence of disused pits) covered with ice the colour of raw umber. Beards of ice on the lock gates. A few rats running slowly through the snow, very tame, presumably weak with hunger.

Housing conditions in Wigan terrible. Mrs H. tells me that at her brother's house (he is only 25, so I think he must be her half brother, but he has already a child of 8), 11 people, 5 of them adults, belonging to 3 different families, live in 4 rooms, "2 up 2 down."

All the miners I meet have either had serious accidents themselves or have friends or relatives who have. Mrs Hornby's cousin had his back broken by a fall of rock – "And he lingered seven year afore he died and it were a-punishing of him all the while" – and her brother in law fell 1200 feet down the shaft of a new pit. Apparently he bounced from side to side, so was presumably dead before he got to the bottom. Mrs H. adds: "They wouldn't never have collected t'pieces only he were wearing a new suit of oilskins."

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15.2.36

Went with N.U.W.M. collectors on their rounds with a view to collecting facts about housing conditions, especially in the caravans. Have made notes on these, Q.V.[1] What chiefly struck me was the expression on some of the women's faces, especially those in the more crowded caravans. One woman had a face like a death's head. She had a look of absolutely intolerable misery and degradation. I gathered that she felt as I would feel if I were coated all over with dung. All the people however seemed to take these conditions quite for granted. They have been promised houses over and over again but nothing has come of it and they have got into the way of thinking that a liveable house is something absolutely unattainable.

Passing up a horrible squalid side-alley, saw a woman, youngish but very pale and with the usual dragged exhausted look, kneeling by the gutter outside a house and poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe, which was blocked. I thought how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling in the gutter in a back-alley in Wigan, in the bitter cold, prodding a stick up a blocked drain. At that moment she looked up and caught my eye, and her expression was as desolate as I have ever seen; it struck me that she was thinking just the same thing as I was.[2]

Changing lodgings as Mrs H. is ill with some mysterious malady and ordered into hospital. They have found lodgings for me at 22 Darlington Rd., over a tripe shop where they take in lodgers.[3] The husband an ex-miner (age 58) the wife ill with a weak heart, in bed on sofa in kitchen. Social atmosphere much as at the H.s but house appreciably dirtier and very smelly. A number of other lodgers. An old ex-miner, age about 75, on old age pension plus half a crown weekly from parish (12/6 in all.) Another, said to be of superior type and "come down in the world," more or less bedridden. An Irish ex-miner who had shoulder blade and several ribs crushed by a fall of stone a few years ago and lives on disability pension of about 25/- a week. Of distinctly superior type and started off as a clerk but went "down pit" because he was big and strong and could earn more as a miner (this was before the War.) Also some newspaper canvassers. Two for John Bull, distinctly moth eaten, ages about 40 and 55, one quite young and was for four years in rubber firm in Calcutta. Cannot quite make this lad out. He puts on Lancashire accent when talking to the others (he belongs locally) but to me talks in the usual "educated" accent. The family apart from the Forrests themselves consists of a fat son who is at work somewhere and lives nearby, his wife Maggie who is

in the shop nearly all day, their two kids, and Annie, fiancée of the other son who is in London. Also a daughter in Canada (Mrs F. says “at Canada.”) Maggie and Annie do practically the whole of the work of the house and shop. Annie very thin, overworked (she also works in a dress-sewing place) and obviously unhappy. I gather that the marriage is by no means certain to take place but that Mrs F. treats Annie as a relative all the same and that Annie groans under her tyranny. Number of rooms in the house exclusive of shop premises, 5 or six and a bathroom-W.C. Nine people sleeping here. Three in my room besides myself.

Struck by the astonishing ignorance about and wastefulness of food among the working class people here – more even than in the south, I think. One morning when washing in the H.s’ scullery made an inventory of the following food: A piece of bacon about 5 pounds. About 2 pounds of shin of beef. About a pound and a half of liver (all of these uncooked.) The wreck of a monstrous meet pie (Mrs H. when making a pie always made it in an enamelled basin such as is used for washing up in. Ditto with puddings.) A dish containing 15 or 20 eggs. A number of small cakes. A flat fruit pie and a “cake-a-pie” (pastry with currants in it.) Various fragments of earlier pies. 6 large loaves and 12 small ones (I had seen Mrs H. cook these the night before.) Various odds and ends of butter, tomatoes, opened tins of milk etc. There was also more food keeping warm in the oven in the kitchen. Everything except bread habitually left about uncovered and shelves filthy. Food here consists almost entirely of bread and starch. A typical day’s meals at the H.s’. Breakfast (about 8 am): Two fried eggs and bacon, bread (no butter) and tea. Dinner (about 12.30 pm): A monstrous plate of stewed beef, dumplings and boiled potatoes (equal to about 3 Lyons portions) and a big helping of rice pudding or suet pudding. Tea (about 5 pm): A plate of cold meat, bread and butter, sweet pastries and tea. Supper (about 11 pm): fish and chips, bread and butter and tea.

[1] Q.V = quod vide = which see (in this case Orwell’s notes, some of which are reproduced in the Complete Works; see X, 546; also plate 31 of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (where the caravans are in Durham, not Wigan).

[2] Orwell developed this entry in *The Road to Wigan Pier* – [follow the link to read it.](#)

[3] 22 Darlington Rd.: (‘Rd.’ Typed in error for Street). Orwell left 72 Warrington Lane when Mrs Hornby was taken ill and had to be admitted to hospital. Lodgings were found for him over the infamous tripe shop described in chapter 1 of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. This is usually taken to be 22 Darlington Street (see Crick, p. 282) but Sydney Smith (b. 1909) argues it was 35 Sovereign Street, lodgers living next door at no. 33. See *Orwell Remembered*, pp. 136-9. Orwell certainly addressed his letters from 22 Darlington Street.

16.2.36

Great excitement because a couple who stayed here for a month about Xmas have been arrested (at Preston) as coiners and it is believed they were making their false coins while here. The police inspector here for about an hour asking questions. Mrs F. tells of snooping round their room while they were out and finding a lump of something like solder under the mattress and some little pots like egg-cups only larger. Mrs F. agreed instantly to everything the police inspector suggested, and when he was upstairs searching the room I made two suggestions and she agreed to those too. I could see she had made up her mind they were guilty on hearing they were unmarried. When the inspector had written out her statement it came out that she could not read or write (except her signature), though her husband can read a little.

One of the canvassers' beds is jammed across the foot of mine. Impossible to stretch my legs out straight as if I do so my feet are in the small of his back. It seems a long time since I slept between linen sheets. Twill sheets even at the M[eade]s. Theirs (the M.s') was the only house I have been in since leaving London that did not smell.

17.2.36

The newspaper-canvassers are rather pathetic. Of course it is a quite desperate job. I fancy what John Bull do is to take on people who make frantic efforts and work up a little more or less spurious business for a while, then sack them and take on more, and so on. I should judge these men each make £2 or £3 a week. Both have families and one is a grandfather. They are so hard up that they cannot pay for full board but pay something for their rooms and have a squalid little cupboard of food in the kitchen, from which they take out bread, packets of marg. etc and cook themselves meals in a shamefaced manner. They are allocated so many houses each day and have to knock at every door and book a minimum number of orders. They are at present working some swindle on behalf of John Bull by which you get a "free" tea set by sending two shillings worth of stamps and twenty four coupons. As soon as they have had their food they start filling up blank forms for the next day, and presently the older one falls asleep in his chair and begins snoring loudly.

Am struck, though, by their knowledge of working-class conditions. They can tell you all about housing, rents, rates, state of trade etc. in every town in the north of England.

18.2.36

In the early morning the mill girls clumping down the cobbled street, all in clogs, make a curiously formidable sound, like an army hurrying into battle. I suppose this is the typical sound of Lancashire. And the typical imprint in the mud outline of a clog-iron, like one half of a cow's hoof. Clogs are very cheap. They cost about 5/- a pair and need not wear out for years because all they need is new irons costing a few pence.

As always and everywhere, the dress peculiar to the locality is considered plebeian. A very down in the mouth respectable woman, at one of the houses I visited with the N.U.W.M. collectors, said:

"I've always kept myself decent-like. I've never worn a shawl over my head – I wouldn't be seen in such a thing. I've worn a hat since I was a girl. But it don't do you much good. At Christmas time we was that hard put to it that I thought I'd go up and try for a well-wisher. (Hamper given away by some charitable organisation.) When I got up there the clergyman says to me, 'You don't want no well-wisher;' he says. 'There's plenty worse than you. We knows many a one that's living on bread and jam,' he says. 'And how do you know what we're living on?' I says. He says, 'You can't be so bad if you can dress as well as that,' he says – meaning my hat. I didn't get no well-wisher. If I'd ha' gone up with a shawl over my head I'd ha' got it. That's what you get for keeping yourself respectable."

19.2.36

When a "dirt-heap" sinks, as it does ultimately, it leaves a hummocky surface which is made more so by the fact that in times of strikes the miners dig into some of these places in search of small coals.

One which is used as a playground looks like a choppy sea suddenly frozen. It is called locally “the flock mattress.” The soil over them is grey and cindery and only an evil-looking brownish grass grows on them.

This evening to a social the N.U.W.M had got up in aid of Thaelmann’s defence-fund. Admission and refreshments (cup of tea and meat pie) 6d. About 200 people, preponderantly women, largely members of the Co-Op,^o in one of whose rooms it was held, and I suppose for the most part living directly or indirectly on the dole. Round the back a few aged miners sitting looking on benevolently, a lot of very young girls in front. Some dancing to the concertina (many of the girls confessed that they could not dance, which struck me as rather pathetic) and some excruciating singing. I suppose these people represented a fair cross-section of the more revolutionary element in Wigan. If so, God help us. Exactly the same sheep-like crowd – gaping girls and shapeless middle-aged women dozing over their knitting – that you see everywhere else. There is no turbulence left in England. One good song, however, by an old woman, I think a cockney, who draws the old age pension and makes a bit by singing at pubs, with the refrain:

“For you can’t do that there ‘ere,

“No, you can’t do that there ‘ere;

“Anywhere else you can do that there,

“But you can’t do that there ‘ere.” [1]

[1] For you can’t do that there ‘ere: Orwell mentions this song in ‘Songs We used to Sing’, 19 January 1946 (CW, XVIII, p. 51) and suggests it seems to be ‘a reflection of the existing political situation...perhaps a half-conscious response to Hitler’.

20.2.36

This afternoon with Paddy Grady to see the unemployed miners robbing the “dirt-train,” or, as they call it, “scrambling for the coal.” A most astonishing sight. We went by the usual frightful routes along the colliery railway line to fir-tree sidings, on our way meeting various men and women with sacks of stolen coal which they had slung over bicycles. I would like to know where they got these bicycles – perhaps made of odd parts picked off rubbish dumps. None had mudguards, few had saddles and some had not even tyres. When we got to the big dirt-heap where the trainloads of shale from that pit are discharged, we found about 50 men picking over the dirt, and they directed us to the place further up the line where the men board the train. When we got there we found not less than 100 men, a few boys, waiting, each with a sack and coal hammer strapped under his coat tails. Presently the train hove in sight, coming round the bend at about 20 mph. 50 or 70 men rushed for it, seized hold of the bumpers etc. and hoisted themselves onto the trucks. It appears that each truck is regarded as the property of the men who have succeeded in getting onto it while it is moving. The engine ran the trucks up onto the dirt-heap, uncoupled them and came back for the remaining trucks. There was the same wild rush and the second train was boarded in the same manner, only a few men failing to get on to it. As soon as the trucks had been uncoupled the men on top began shovelling the stuff out to their women and other supporters below, who rapidly sorted out the dirt and put all the coal (a considerable amount but all small, in lumps about the size of eggs) into their sacks. Further down the “broo” were the people who had failed to get onto either train and were collecting the tiny fragments of coal that came sliding down from above. You do not, of course, when you are boarding the train, know whether you are getting onto a good truck or not,

and what kind of truck you get is entirely luck. Thus some of the trucks, instead of being loaded with the dirt from the floor of the mine, which of course contains a fair quantity of coal, were loaded entirely with shale. But it appears, what I had never heard of before, that among the shale, at any rate in some mines, there occurs an inflammable rock called "cannel" (not certain of spelling) which makes fairly good fuel. It is not commercially valuable because it is hard to work and burns too fast, but for ordinary purposes is good enough. Those who were on the shale trucks were picking out the "cannel," which is almost exactly like the shale except that it is a little darker and is known by splitting horizontally, almost like slate. I watched the people working until they had almost emptied the trucks. There were twenty trucks and something over 100 people were at work on them. Each, so far as I could judge, got about ½ cwt. of either coal or "cannel." This performance sometimes happens more than once a day when several dirt-trains are sent out, so it is evident that several tons of fuel are stolen every day.

The economics and ethics of the whole business are rather interesting. In the first place, robbing the dirt-train is of course illegal, and one is technically trespassing by being on the dirt-heap at all. Periodically people are prosecuted – in fact in this morning's Examiner there was a report of 3 men being fined for it. But no notice is taken of the prosecutions, and in fact one of the men fined was there this afternoon. But at the same time the coal company have no intention of using the coal etc. that is thrown out among the dirt, because it would not repay the cost of sorting. If not stolen, therefore, it would be wasted. Moreover, this business saves the company the expense of emptying the trucks, because by the time the coal-pickers have done with them they are empty. Therefore they connive at the raiding of the train – I noticed that the engine-driver took no notice of the men clambering onto the trucks. The reason for the periodical prosecutions is said to be that there are so many accidents. Only recently a man slipped under the train and had both legs cut off. Considering the speed the train goes at, it is remarkable that accidents do not happen oftener.

The most curious vehicle I saw used for carrying away coal was a cart made of a packing case and the wheels from two kitchen mangles.

Some of this coal that is stolen is said to be on sale in the town at 1/6 a bag.

21.2.36

The squalor of this house is beginning to get on my nerves. Nothing is ever cleaned or dusted, the rooms not done out till 5 in the afternoon, and the cloth never even removed from the kitchen table. At supper you still see the crumbs from breakfast. The most revolting feature is Mrs F. being always in bed on the kitchen sofa. She has a terrible habit of tearing off strips of newspaper, wiping her mouth with them and then throwing them onto the floor. Unemptied chamberpot under the table at breakfast this morning. The food is dreadful, too. We are given those little twopenny readymade steak and kidney pies out of stock. I hear horrible stories, too, about the cellars where the tripe is kept and which are said to swarm with black beetles. Apparently they only get in fresh supplies of tripe at long intervals. Mrs F. dates events by this. "Let me see, now, I've had in three lots of froze (frozen tripe) since then," etc. I judge they get in a consignment of "froze" about once in a fortnight. Also it is very tiring being unable to stretch my legs straight out at night.

24.2.36

Yesterday went down Crippen's mine with Jerry Kennan, [1] another electrician friend of his, two small sons of the latter, two other electricians and an engineer belonging to the pit, who showed us round. The depth to the cage bottom was 300 yards. We went down at 10.30 and came up at 1.30, having covered, according to the engineer who showed us round, about 2 miles.

As the cage goes down you have the usual momentary qualm in your belly, then a curious stuffed-up feeling in your ears. In the middle of its run the cage works up a tremendous speed (in some of the deeper mines they are said to touch 60 mph. or more) then slows down so abruptly that it is difficult to believe you are not going upwards again. The cages are tiny – about 8 feet long by 3½ wide by 6 high. They are supposed to hold 10 men or (I think) about a ton and a half of coal. There were only six of us and two boys, but we had difficulty in packing in and it is important to face in the direction you are going to get out the other end.

Down below it was lighter than I expected, because apart from the lamps we all carried there were electric lights in the main roads. But what I had not expected, and what for me was the most important feature all through, was the lowness of the roof. I had vaguely imagined wandering about in places rather like the tunnels of the Underground; but as a matter of fact there were very few places where you could stand upright. In general the roof was about 4 ft. or 4 ft. 6 ins high, sometimes much lower, with every now and again a beam larger than the others under which you had to duck especially low. In places the walls were quite neatly built up, almost like the stone walls in Derbyshire, with slabs of shale. There were pit-props, almost all of wood, every yard or so overhead. They are made of small larch trees sawn to the appropriate length (from the quantity used I see now why people laying down plantations almost always plant larch) and are simply laid on the ends of the upright props, which are laid on slabs of wood, thus: and not fixed in any way. The bottom slabs gradually sink into the floor, or, as the miners put it, "the floor comes up," but the weight overhead keeps the whole thing in place. By the way the steel girders used here and there instead of wooden props had buckled, you got an idea of the weight of the roof. Underfoot is thick stone dust and the rails, about 2 ½ ft. wide, for the trolleys. When the path is down hill miners often slide down these on their clogs, which, being hollow underneath, more or less fit onto the rails.

After a few hundred yards of walking doubled up and once or twice having to crawl, I began to feel the effects in a violent pain all down my thighs. One also gets a bad crick in the neck, because though stooping one has to look up for fear of knocking into the beams, but the pain in the thighs is the worst. Of course as we got nearer the coal face the roads tended to get lower. Once we crawled through a temporary tunnel which was like an enlarged rat hole, with no props, and in one place there had been a fall of stone during the night – 3 or 4* tons of stuff, I should judge. It had blocked up the entire road except for a tiny aperture near the roof which we had to crawl through without touching any timber. Presently I had to stop for a minute to rest my knees, which were giving way, and then after a few hundred yards more we came to the first working. This was only a small working with a machine worked by two men, much like an enlarged version of the electric drills [2] used for street mending. Nearby was the dynamo (or whatever it is called) which supplied the power through cables to this and the other machines; also the comparatively small drills (but they weigh 50 lbs. each and have to be hoisted onto the shoulder) for drilling holes for blasting charges; also bundles of miners' tools locked together on wires like bundles of keys, which is always done for fear of losing them.

We went a few hundred yards further and came to one of the main workings. The men were not actually working here, but a shift was just coming down to start work about 250 yards further on.

Here there was one of the larger machines which have a crew of 5 men to work them. This machine has a revolving wheel on which there are teeth about a couple of inches long set at various angles; in principle it is rather like an immensely thickened circular saw with the teeth much further apart, and running horizontally instead of vertically. The machine is dragged into position by the crew and the front part of it can be swivelled round in any direction and pressed against the coal face by the man working it. Two men called "scuffers" shovel the coal onto a rubberbelt conveyor which carries it through a tunnel to the tubs on the main road, where it is hauled by steam haulage to the cages. I had not realised before that the men operating the coal-cutter are working in a place rather less than a yard high. When we crawled in under the roof to the coal face we could at best kneel, and then not kneel upright, and I fancy the men must do most of their work lying on their bellies. The heat also was frightful – round about 100 degrees F. so far as I could judge. The crew keep burrowing into the coal face, cutting a semi-circular track, periodically hauling the machine forward and propping as they go. I was puzzled to know how that monstrous machine – flat in shape, of course, but 6 or 8 feet long and weighing several tons, and only fitted with skids, not wheels – could have been got into position through that mile or so of passages. Even to drag the thing forward as the seam advances must be a frightful labour, seeing that then men have to do it practically lying down. Up near the coal face we saw a number of mice, which are said to abound there. They are said to be commonest in pits where there are or have been horses. I don't know how they get down into the mine in the first place. Probably in the cages, but possibly by falling down the shaft, as it is said that a mouse (owing to its surface area being large relative to its weight) can drop any distance uninjured.

On the way back my exhaustion grew so great that I could hardly keep going at all, and towards the end I had to stop and rest every fifty yards. The periodical effort of bending and raising oneself at each successive beam was fearful, and the relief when one could stand upright, usually owing to a hole in the roof, was enormous. At times my knees simply refused to lift me after I had knelt down. It was made worse by the fact that at the lowest parts the roof is usually on a slope, so that besides bending you have to walk more or less sideways. We were all pretty distressed except the engineer taking us round, who was used to it, and the two small boys, who did not have to bend to any extent; but I was by a good deal the worst, being the tallest. I would like to know whether any miners are as tall as I am, and if so, whether they suffer for it. The few miners whom we met down the pit could move with extraordinary agility, running about on all fours among the props almost like dogs.

After we had at last emerged and washed off the more obtrusive dirt and had some beer, I went home and had dinner and then soaked myself for a long time in a hot bath. I was surprised at the quantity of dirt and the difficulty of getting it off. It had penetrated to every inch of my body in spite of my overalls and my clothes underneath those. Of course very few miners have baths in their homes – only a tub of water in front of the kitchen fire. I should say it would be quite impossible to keep clean without a proper bathtub.

In the room where we changed our clothes there were several cages of canaries. These have to be kept there by law, to test the air in case of explosion. They are sent down in the cage, and, if they do not faint, the air is all right.

The Davy lamps give out a fair amount of light. There is an air intake at the top but the flame is cut off from this by a fine gauze. Flame cannot pass through holes of less than a certain diameter. The gauze therefore lets the air in to sustain the flame but will not let the flame out to explode dangerous gases. Each lamp when full will burn for 8–12 hours, and they are locked, so that if they

go out down the pit they cannot be relighted. Miners are searched for matches before going down the pit.

* Jerry Kennan said 20 or 30. I don't know which of us would be best judge

[1] Jerry (Joe) Kennan: an unemployed collier at the time and an activist in the Independent Labour Party. He maintained that the lodgings at 72 Warrington Lane were spotlessly clean, despite Orwell's strictures, and 'that Orwell left it for the tripe shop in order to find something worse'. Whether hurried or not, Orwell's departure tallies with Mrs Hornby's illness. Kennan, understandably, may have resented not being sent an autographed copy of *The Road to Wigan Pier*; on the other hand he was gracious in stating that 'the book was a fair book. I don't think it exaggerated the situation at all. And I think it gives a clear picture of what conditions were like in industrial areas in 1936' (*Orwell Remembered*, pp. 130 and 133).

[2] Orwell presumably meant pneumatic drills.

2.3.36

At 154 Wallace Road, Sheffield.

Thick snow everywhere on the hills as I came along. Stone boundaries between the fields running across the snow like black piping across a white dress. Warm and sunny, however. For the first time in my life saw rooks copulating. On the ground, not in a tree. The manner of courtship was peculiar. The female stood with her beak open and the male walked round her and it appeared as though he was feeding her.

Memories of Wigan: Slagheaps like mountains, smoke, rows of blackened houses, sticky mud criss-crossed by imprints of clogs, heavy-set young women standing at street corners with their babies wrapped in their shawls, immense piles of broken chocolate in cut-price confectioners' windows.