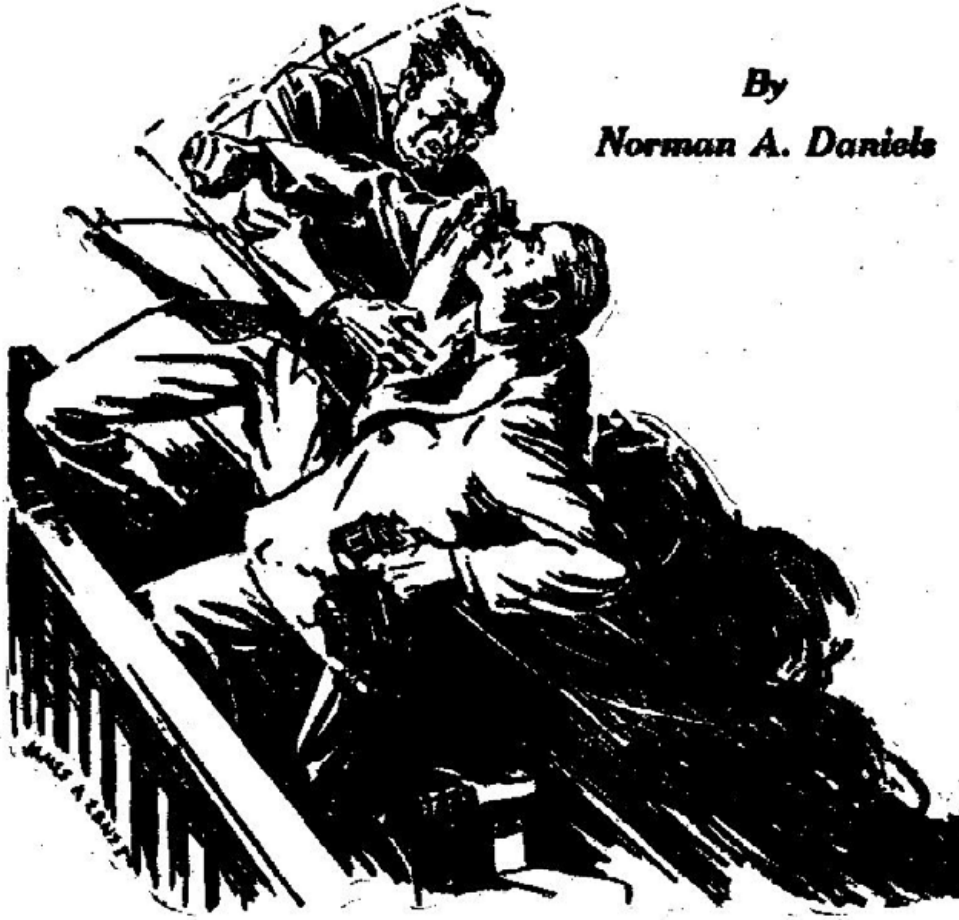


Dead Men's Music

By
Norman A. Daniels



There were tons of ore that the government needed in the mine—but a legend kept it idle. And Steve Banning had come to a death grip with a ghostly horde before he could start it working.

STEVE BANNING, trouble shooter and engineer for the Apex Mining Company, climbed out of his light coupe. With his long strides, his tall, well-built figure advanced toward a wooden building which housed the general store in this once prosperous mining town. Of the three thousand inhabitants who had lived here when the mine was in operation, only a handful was left. Desolate houses and streets testified to the fact that the town had once been busy.

Alec Mason, Banning's assistant, stood on the porch of the general store. He shook hands with Banning and led him over to a corner where no one could listen.

Mason said, "Steve, it's worse than I thought. Your instructions were to come here and look over the mine. I looked it over, but I've only been down once—and that was to bring up a corpse. The man we hired to start cleaning up the shaft was killed this morning, right after I got here. The body is in a shed back of the store.

Come on, I'll show you."

Mason led the way to the old shack. In a few moments he lifted an old blanket, and Steve Banning winced at what he saw.

"Why, the man has been crushed to death," he said. "I'll bet every bone in his body is broken. Say, wait a minute—let me think. This is the mine where that terrible accident happened four years ago. About three hundred men were down below at work when there was a cave-in that threatened the whole mine. In a stampede to the elevator, about a hundred men were trampled to death."

Mason nodded. "This is the place, Steve, and that's what makes things so difficult. You couldn't get a miner to go down that shaft for a thousand dollars a day. They claim those dead men still live in the mine—that is, their ghosts. Now the word is going around that Sorel—he's the dead man — was killed by those ghosts because they don't want anybody down there."

"Nonsense," Steve snapped. "There is no such thing as one ghost, let alone a hundred of them. Where did you find this dead man? Who was with him?"

Mason shrugged. "I don't like to believe it either, Steve, but facts are facts. Sorel went down alone. He was the only man in town with nerve enough to do it. He didn't come up, so I went looking for him. I found him at the bottom of the shaft just as he is now—crushed to death."

"Where was the elevator?" Steve asked quickly.

"I thought of that, too," Mason said. "So I checked the elevator and it hasn't moved in four years. There's no current, so it couldn't possibly operate. Anyhow, Sorel was no fool. He'd never have stood beneath the platform no matter what happened down there."

Steve Banning rubbed his chin and stared at the blanketed figure.

"What's your idea, Alec?" he asked.

Mason said softly, "I'm beginning to think like the rest of the people in town. That mine isn't meant for human beings. Something killed Sorel. One man couldn't batter him like that, but a hundred could. Old-timers here say the body looks exactly like those brought up after the accident four years ago. Besides, they've heard weird sounds from the deserted mine."

Banning walked out of the place and found the sunshine warm and comforting. Miners were a superstitious lot, and Banning was a miner. Hard-headed, true, but those superstitions clung no matter how coolly they were thought over or how many angles were rejected.

Mason walked beside him. "It's no use, Steve. Maybe there is ore in the mine—plenty of it. They never did work that vein very far. The country needs the ore badly. I'm willing to work it, but none of these men are, even though half of them are starving to death."

WHEN they entered the general store a middle-aged, stocky man came forward to meet Steve. They shook hands. Mason introduced the owner to Banning.

"This is Mr. Tuttle, the chief stockholder in the mine. He wants it worked, naturally. That's why he called on Apex to handle the digging."

Tuttle nodded. "I don't even care if there are any profits so long as the ore is put into war use. How about it, Banning? Can you open her up?"

"We'll get her going," Steve promised, "if you can furnish us men to work after the mess is cleaned up. Mason says nobody will go down. They're afraid of a hundred ghosts."

"That's right," Tuttle sighed. "Personally, it's all bunk so far as I'm concerned, but—"

"Will you go down and help show

these miners their superstitions are a lot of bunk?" Banning asked quickly.

"Well—no. No, I won't. Come to think of it, I'm scared of ghosts too, even if I don't believe in 'em. Look here, Banning, I was at the mine shaft when that stampede began. I listened to those men screaming and dying down there. I saw the bodies brought up, smashed just like poor Sorel was crushed. A man doesn't forget those things. No, I won't go down."

Banning turned on his heel. He walked to where his car was parked and hauled out a big suitcase. Knowing that Mason had already arranged a room above the store, Banning hurried to it and changed into old clothes. He tucked a forty-five automatic under his shirt and took a powerful searchlight with him when he went down to the store.

"I'm going into the mine," he said. "Coming, Alec? You don't have to."

"I'll come," Mason nodded. "It's my job and an important one. We've got to convince the miners it's safe down there; otherwise tons of ore we need to whip Hitler and Tojo will be idle. Let's go."

Tuttle followed them to the door. "I think you're foolish, both of you," he said. "If something should happen, that would finish it completely. Right now, after hearing about Sorel, the men are scared stiff. If one of you doesn't come up, that will end the matter forever."

Banning didn't reply. He strode down the street about a hundred feet. Then he turned into a lane leading to the mine shaft and began to check the elevator apparatus. It was rusty and looked incapable of use. He pushed home a switch, but nothing happened. All current had been cut off for years.

"Looks like we go down the hard way," he grinned at Mason. "Remember what I said. Stay up here if you're scared."

"I'm plenty scared," Mason admitted,

"but I'm going anyway. Best method is to slide down the rope. I did it to rescue Sorel. I know the way. Follow me."

Mason grabbed the rope with gloved hands, swung himself over the shaft and rapidly lowered away. He shouted up that everything was all right. Banning slid down, and turned on the big searchlight. As he swept the ground with the flash, Mason pointed to the spot where Sorel's body was found. All around it were the prints of heavy boots—hundreds of them.

Mason shivered. "I didn't notice those before, but they must have been there. No one else entered the mine. Take a look at the lift platform and see if you think it was used to crush Sorel."

"It couldn't have been." Banning turned his light toward the heavy elevator. "There's no juice. But you can bet on it, Sorel didn't just lie down and let a hundred ghosts trample him. Crushed body or not, footprints or not. Let's go deeper and see how the land lies."

THEY proceeded along the tunnel until it narrowed and they had to travel single file. Mason took up the rear position. Banning went forward, throwing the beam of his light well ahead. Often the tunnel curved crazily, and he took these turns with considerable caution.

Rusty picks and shovels littered the way, relics of the ghastly accident four years ago. Tools that miners had dropped in their mad rush to what they thought was safety, but which turned out to be worse than the cave-in. Banning found the spot that had fallen in too. He did some quick checking up.

"In two weeks we could have this mess cleared," he told Mason. "The accident happened because the beams weren't properly reinforced. Mind going back after our tools? We'll have to take measurements and order the necessary

material right away.”

“Go back—alone?” Mason shuddered. “Sure, why not? After all, what could hurt a guy down here? Know what I think? Sorel was trying to climb the rope and fell. He hit the bottom of the shaft in such a way that he was crushed to death. I’ll be back in twenty minutes.”

Mason had a two-cell flash which he used to pick his way back toward the shaft. Banning placed the larger light on a fallen beam and took a small, sharp-pointed tool from his pocket. He proceeded to collect samples of ore. It looked rich and heavy, something which should certainly be worked as soon as possible. There were the makings of tanks, ships, planes and guns in this dirt.

Suddenly Banning paused. A low roar seemed to fill the mine. The peculiar sound made Banning freeze in sudden terror because he thought he knew what that sound resembled. It was as if several hundred voices were frantically yelling and hundreds of feet pounding through the tunnels.

As the roaring grew in intensity, the mine became filled with shrieks and curses and screams of horror. Banning drew the gun, picked up the light and started back, moving as fast as he could. He took a dozen turns, keeping in the general direction of the shaft. If he ever got lost in here, he’d probably starve to death before anyone would find him.

The sound was louder as he got closer and closer to the shaft. Clearly now, Banning heard enough to realize that this must be the same horrible sound which had filled the mine that day of the accident, four years ago. It was beyond belief up on the ground and in the sunlight. But down here, in the depths of the earth, anything was possible.

Halfway toward the shaft, the noise suddenly was cut off. The silence that

followed was almost as difficult to bear. Then this was broken by one long, shrill scream that ended on a high note with an abruptness that signified disaster. The voice was familiar, even in its shrill tone.

Banning gathered all the steam he could and pounded along the tunnel. He saw daylight filtering down the shaft, a grey, ugly sort of light, but he didn’t see anyone. Not at first.

Almost automatically, he looked toward the spot where the body of Sorel had been found. Banning rushed to the place. Alec Mason lay there, crushed into an almost unrecognizable pulp. Banning knelt beside the figure and felt for a pulse he knew couldn’t possibly exist. Somebody was shouting down the shaft.

Banning peered up, to see the frightened faces of Tuttle and several men from the village. He yelled for a rope and one came down quickly. Looking about briefly, Banning found an old blanket into which he rolled the corpse. He made a cradle out of the rope, and finally it was hauled up slowly.

BANNING sat down on the elevator platform which was only about two feet off the bottom of the shaft. He shut off his light and sat there in the grey light trying to think. That horrible din of men shouting and fleeing for their lives, was no part of plain imagination. Neither was the corpse of Alec Mason. He’d actually heard the noise and seen Mason’s corpse.

As Banning thought of his young assistant, his hands curled into tight, hard fists. Mason had worked with him many times. There were few men better fitted or trained for this kind of work. Few men who were better in anything, or in any way.

Banning’s old superstitions came back and brought sweat to his brow. Were there a hundred ghosts—a horde of spectres

living in this mine and keeping it for themselves? Did they trample to death anyone who invaded the shaft, just as they'd been trampled to death themselves four years before? It took will power to stifle an urge to scramble up the rope into the sunlight, and leave this forbidden place to its invisible hordes.

Firmly rejecting any such idea, Banning dropped off the platform and crouched beside the spot where two men had died within ten hours. There was nothing except the marks of all those boots. Footprints which looked as though they'd been made by the fighting, yelling men as they tried to escape. Yet such marks wouldn't last all these years. Dust, if nothing else, would have filled them in. They were there though, plainly impressed in the dirt.

Banning looked beneath the elevator platform. The small space ended with solid rock from which the shaft had been partially hewn. There wasn't much else he could do here now. If ghosts were not responsible for the deaths of Sorel and Alec Mason, then it was murder and some agency above ground was behind it. Banning seized the rope, wound one leg around it and hoisted himself up. Eager hands were there to help him and questions were hurled at him. Banning faced the assembled men, most of whom were miners.

"I won't lie about this," he said. "Mason went down with me. I sent him back for some equipment. Shortly afterwards, I heard the sound of hundreds of voices and feet. Just as it must have sounded when the accident happened four years ago. Then Mason screamed. I hurried to the shaft and found him, just as he'd found Sorel this morning—crushed to death."

"Like them ghosts who trampled the life out of him," someone shouted.

"Sure—the ghosts live down there. The ghosts of Johnny Blake and Pete Caldwell and Jerry Lynch and all the others. Mister, you know what happened today. You don't think we'd go down into that branch of Hades, do you?"

"I do," Banning said flatly, "provided I can explain how those men were murdered. I say murdered because ghosts didn't kill them. There are no ghosts. Somebody doesn't want the mine worked. Possibly we have an Axis spy here whose job is to keep us from getting valuable ore out of the mine. Possibly it's something else, and I'm going to find out. Tuttle, I want to talk with you alone."

After they walked away from the group of men, Banning said, "Tuttle, that statement about a spy is just a hunch. Are there any Germans living here? The kind who might side with Hitler and be fanatic enough to act for him?"

Tuttle ran a finger around a collar that was at least one size too big for him.

"Well—there's Fritz. Fritz Stregel, but he wouldn't do a thing like that. Anyway, how could it be done? Nobody was in the mine but you and Mason."

"Yes—and this morning only Sorel was in the mine. Somebody gets in somehow. Ghosts didn't do this, Tuttle, and you know it. I'll have a talk with this Fritz. I'll spend the rest of the day and night checking up. Then, if I don't find anything, I'm going to call in the F.B.I. It's my job though, and I'll do it if possible."

FIRST Banning examined the two bodies, especially their clothing and the dirt that was imbedded into the cloth. He went to his room, gathered some equipment and proceeded to the shaft. Several men watched him swing down into the shaft. They shook their heads as though they never expected to see him

alive again.

At the bottom, Banning took samples of dirt from the spot where Mason and Sorel had been found. He looked up, saw men staring down at him and crawled beneath the elevator. It was a fairly tight squeeze to work in, but he took his light along and collected more samples of dirt. Then he crawled back to the shaft proper and proceeded into the mine, along the winding tunnels.

He checked as many as possible without finding a thing. The dirt along the tunnels was hard packed to resist leaving any imprints of shoes. Banning didn't feel quite as brave as he pretended for the benefit of the miners. After all, Tuttle was right. He and Mason had been alone in the mine. It was almost reasonable to assume that no human agency could have killed Mason—or Sorel.

If he could only find something! A cigarette butt, the imprint of a heel, the scraping of a light against the walls—but there was nothing. He'd need a week to examine every tunnel thoroughly.

Banning gave up after three hours of it. Three hours laden with pure horror, for he expected at any time to hear the howling of those ghosts.

It was almost dark when he climbed out of the shaft. He walked slowly toward the store. Tuttle was inside waiting on customers. Men favored Banning with half-frightened glances and nobody spoke. Tuttle edged over.

"Fritz was away from his shack all day. I found that out anyway. He's back there now, though."

"I'll see him as soon as I get something to eat," Banning said. "Then I'm going to rest. In the morning I'll go back into the mine and chart it. I'll work from then on, following those tunnels. I'll find the reason for all this or I won't come out."

Banning cleaned up, found a restaurant and ate his dinner in complete silence. It seemed that the miners resented his presence, as if they thought the ghosts should be allowed to live in peace down in the depths of the cursed mine.

Striding out of the place, he headed toward the far end of town where this man Fritz lived alone in a squalid shack. He found the place easily enough and walked boldly toward it.

There was a single shot. Banning instantly dropped flat and hauled out his own gun. The shot wasn't repeated, but it had come from around the corner of the shack. He crawled a little closer, arose and rushed the place, gun ready.

He reached the door and found it ajar. After kicking it open, he aimed the gun and commanded Fritz to come out with his hands up. There was no answer. Banning snapped on a flashlight and sprayed the room with its beam. The place was badly upset, as though Fritz had been tipped off that Banning was coming, and had gathered his few goods and run for it.

In one corner someone had burned a pile of papers. Banning knelt and examined what was left. They seemed to be German newspapers. Shrugging, Banning left the shack and searched all around it. The gunman had apparently fled.

Banning told Tuttle about it later. "Certainly looks as if my hunch was right. Fritz beat it, but first he tried to knock me over with a bullet. Any idea where he'd go?"

"Him?" Tuttle said derisively. "He never talked to anybody. Some say his mind was affected by what happened in the mine. He was right in the thick of it. Badly hurt too. Of course he might have been putting on an act for our benefit. I wouldn't know about that."

"I'll find out about him," Banning

promised. "Right now I'm dead tired. Tomorrow I'm going into the mine at dawn. I'll spend half a day there and if I find nothing, it's time to call in the State Police and the F.B.I."

BANNING left the store and Tuttle began to lock up. Around the corner were steps leading to the floor above and Banning was soon in his room. He lay down in the darkness to think. At two in the morning he looked out of his window.

The village was completely dark except for a diner which was just off the highway and also close to the mine. Four trucks were pulled up behind the diner and two more were in front. Apparently, there were no nighthawks in this town.

Banning quietly left his room, tiptoed down the outside steps and reached the back of the store. Peering around in the darkness, he was attracted by the heavy electric light wires leading into the store. Tuttle had various machines and required an extra amount of juice. Banning rubbed his chin for a moment.

He proceeded to one of the store's cellar windows and got it open with that sharp miner's tool he carried. Slipping through, he landed on a cement floor. He covered the lens of a flashlight so only a tiny ray emanated and inspected the cellar. It was just the usual storage space for stock.

A very faint humming sound made Banning stop dead and listen intently. He traced the sound over to the electric light switchboard. The meter was turning over fast. While he watched, it stopped. Fifteen minutes later it began again, stayed on a short time and stopped. When it started once more, Banning quickly moved out of the cellar and looked at the building. Not a light showed.

Two of the trucks behind the diner started up then and rolled away. Banning

slipped back into the cellar, climbed steps to the store proper. Working like a burglar, he went over Tuttle's files. The other two trucks pulled away while he was busy at this job. Banning went over to a desk, picked up the phone and made a call. Five minutes later he was back in his room.

In the grey of dawn, armed with chart-making equipment and tools he'd need in the mine, Banning walked briskly toward the shaft. He looked around before descending. There were no houses at all nearby. The town was still asleep.

He seized the rope, swung into the shaft and lowered himself to the bottom. There he quickly arranged his tools and spent about ten minutes hard at work. Armed with the big searchlight, he proceeded along the tunnel to the point where it branched off in three directions. From these three sub-tunnels branched still others. He had a tedious job at hand.

Banning made some entries on his charts and took the center tunnel. He was a third of the way along it when he heard that eerie sound start very low and gradually increase until the mine was filled with the screams, curses and pounding feet of the miners who had fled from death four years before.

Banning swung around and started running back to the main tunnel. There was nobody in it. Only the earsplitting noise which chilled his blood and at the same time brought beads of sweat to his face. He kept running toward the shaft.

THERE wasn't enough daylight yet to penetrate to the bottom very well, but Banning did see something that gave him a start. From beneath the elevator platform a bluish light glowed weakly. As he approached, it became stronger and then faded. This was repeated constantly until Banning was quite close. Then it winked out, but not before he saw a man's form

directly beneath the elevator. It was sprawled out and ominously still.

The man lay with his feet in Banning's direction, his head toward the solid rock wall from which that strange light had glowed. Banning's head hurt, his brain reeled. If only that screaming would stop. It seemed to come from a dozen different directions.

He knelt and reached under the platform, but the new victim was too far away to be seized. Banning lay flat and began to wriggle under the elevator. He stopped almost opposite the man who lay so still. Banning tried to turn him over.

Suddenly, the supposedly dead man lashed out a hard blow that clipped Banning on the jaw. He went limp and stayed there. The man yelled an order and began to crawl toward the rock wall. A section of it opened and the blue light illuminated the scene again. The stranger was half through the opening when Banning grabbed his legs and gave him a hard yank.

The man turned quickly and reached beneath his coat. It was difficult to fight this way, lying flat, but Banning fought. When he saw a gun come out, he managed to seize the man's wrist. Banning was strong, in excellent trim. One twist, and bone cracked. His fist traveled about two feet and cracked against the man's jaw. Banning picked up the gun. Noticing that the trick door was slowly moving shut, Banning pumped two bullets through the opening and the door stopped moving. He crawled toward it.

There was a creaking sound above him. The elevator was coming down. Banning paid no attention to it. The platform stopped suddenly, rose again. This time it gained considerable momentum from its greater height, but it stopped in exactly the same place.

Banning wriggled through the half-

open door in the rock wall. Someone fired. Banning, prone, was a poor target. But he was ready for his assailant and fired straight into the tongue of flame which lanced out to kill him. There was a scream. Banning was aware now that the ghostly horde had stopped its wild clamor.

Passing through the door, he scraped a match and held it high. He was in a small cavern, dug out behind the rock. A groaning man lay on the dirt floor. Beside him were two switches. Banning tried one and the ghostly howl started up again. He tested the other and the elevator began to move. Banning grinned.

He hauled out the wounded man who was unconscious now, got him clear of the elevator platform and then dove under to get the one he'd knocked out. Finally, Banning pointed his borrowed gun straight up the shaft and emptied it. He threw this weapon away and drew his own. In a few minutes, men were peering down.

Banning ordered ropes and blankets. He sent the two men up, climbed out of the shaft himself and grinned broadly. Practically everyone in town was assembled near the shaft.

TUTTLE came over beside him and pointed at the two men whom Banning had hauled out of the mine.

"Who are they?" Banning repeated Tuttle's question. "Just a couple of punks. Listen men, this whole thing is cleared up. These men entered the mine at night, usually. They wanted no interference—so they set up arrangements to frighten everybody away. The sound which resembles men running from the cave-in is just a recording. Radio studios use them and they certainly should not be hard to obtain."

"Do you mean there are no ghosts?" Tuttle demanded.

"Exactly. But when Sorel entered the

mine, those crooks realized they had to take sterner measures, so they lured Sorel beneath the elevator. Oh, it works all right. They brought the lift down and crushed him. Then they raised the platform again, shoved him clear of it and left him there. The same thing happened to Alec Mason. It almost happened to me, but I had my suspicions. Beneath the platform is a bed of cement. I found cement adhering to both Sorel's and Mason's clothes so I knew the platform had killed them.

"When I entered the mine, I first propped that elevator platform up so it couldn't squash me. I pretended to fall for the same trick that killed Sorel and Mason. Only it backfired on this pair. Is either of them Fritz?"

"No," Tuttle said. "Maybe they're spies though, and in with Fritz."

"They aren't spies," Banning said. "Offhand, I'd say they were a lower breed of animal. Listen, everyone—very deep in the mine tunnels is a cache of sugar, coffee and everything else that is rationed. Thousands of dollars' worth. The ghosts in that mine run a black market.

"When they found out engineers were coming, they had to get the stuff out. But it took time, so they arranged the ghost business to scare anybody away. Fritz was very likely in with them. He staged his little act to make me believe a spy was trying to keep the mine from being operated."

"I'll help locate that little rat," Tuttle declared loudly.

"I think you probably could find him," Banning said. "Last night much of the stuff was removed—by using the elevator. It was loaded into trucks, and those trucks were stopped by state police whom I

warned. As for the elevator, although it looks as if it hasn't been used in years, the rust on the main shaft is artificial."

"Where does the power come from?" someone asked.

Banning looked at Tuttle. "You know, don't you, Tuttle? The juice flows through the meters in your cellar. Hidden wires carry it to the mine. Grab him!"

Tuttle attempted to crash through the crowd, but it was too thick. Banning seized him by the nape of the neck and shoved him against the wall.

"State police are on their way now, Tuttle. I saw the electric light meter working in your cellar when the building was all dark. I checked your records. As a grocer you were able to buy goods in large quantities from a large number of wholesalers, store it in the mine and wait for rationing to start. As the main stockholder in the mine, you felt pretty safe until the government asked you about opening it. You put on a big front, stalled as long as possible. Then we forced your hand.

"Now the mine will run again. There are no ghosts down there unless they are the ghosts of your greed, Tuttle."

Two carloads of State Troopers were pulling into town. Tuttle saw them and emitted a groan as dismal as the happiness in Banning's smile.

Banning spoke loudly so everyone could hear. "Let's go, men. Dig out your tools. I'll take you below and show you how it was worked—loudspeaker, weird lights, footprints in the dirt made to cover up the marks of boxes filled with rationed goods. You'll see the whole works. And then we'll do some work on our own."