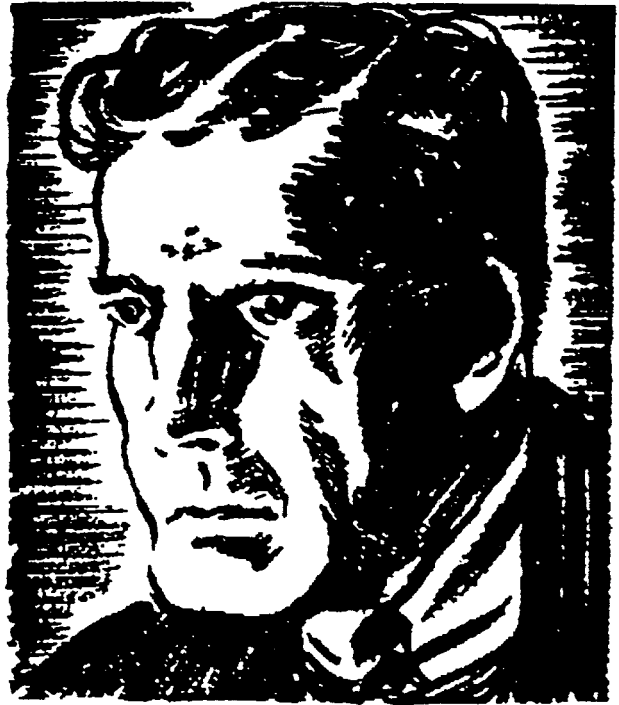


Weird, Baffling Doom Stalks an Abandoned Mine!

DEATH HANGS HIGH

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Detective Brad Halton

BLACK eerie shadows formed strange shaped blotches at the entrance of the old coal mine. The flashlights in the hands of the three men bathed the still figure of old Dan Kirk in a white glow. Even in death the face was contorted in a grimace of stark horror. Thin bony hands were still tightened into hard fists as though he had tried to protect himself as he sprawled on the hard ground.

"Heart failure." Doctor Fell's grating voice cut through the silence as he examined the body. "Plainly caused by fright. There's something weird about this old mine, Wakely."

"He's the third man that's died here like this," said Travers Wakely, his voice trembling. "First Morgan, then Hunter and now Kirk. All of them with that look of fear on their faces and I hired these last two because they claimed they were afraid of nothing!"

County Detective Brad Halton stood silently listening. Fell was almost brutally mechanical in his manner toward death. He reminded Halton of a gaunt crow. Wakely was fat and gross. He was eternally whining and his round moist face wore a petulant expression.

"Nothing more we can do here," said Coroner Fell. He spread a white handkerchief over Kirk's face and then got to his feet. "He's been dead for some time."

"But what about my mine?" demanded Wakely. "The property is valuable." He turned to Halton. "You're the county detective—why can't you do something?"

"I might have been able to do something to prevent Kirk's death if you hadn't waited until tonight to tell me what's been happening here!" Halton's tone was impatient. "When you sent for me yesterday your message didn't say what was wrong."

From somewhere in the darkness came a weird wailing sound.

"What's that?" demanded Wakely, his voice tense.

"I don't know," said Halton, reaching for his .38, "but I'm going to find out."

His flashlight cast a white path ahead of him as he went in the direction of the wailing noise. Abruptly it ceased. He paused and stood listening. All about him was the silence of rock and brush. No sense searching this place in the darkness. Better wait until daylight. He returned to the two men who were still standing by the body of Dan Kirk.

"Find anything?" asked Wakely.

"No, whatever it was is gone now."

"We'd better take Kirk down to the village," said Doctor Fell. "Lead the way with your light, Halton. Wakely and I will carry him."

"I don't—" Wakely started to protest,

"I said we'd carry him!" The doctor's voice was even harsher than usual.

"Oh, all right!" snapped Wakely fretfully.

Halton was thinking swiftly as he led the way down the hill. Something strange about this whole thing. Why hadn't Wakely or Fell sent for him when Morgan had died at the old mine instead of waiting for a third death?

Apparently they had expected to find something wrong at the mine tonight. Halton had sensed it from Wakely's attitude when he had suggested that they go and look the place over right away.

But it was the mine itself that puzzled the county detective as much as anything. Apparently it had been abandoned for years and yet Wakely evidently found the property valuable enough to hire men to guard the place after Morgan's strange death. Men who had apparently died from fright.

They reached the foot of the hill and came out on the road that ran along beside the river. A quarter of a mile away the lights of the village were a dim glow in the distance.

Halton glanced back as he heard a plaintive sound behind him. Fell was walking along carrying the corpse by the arms and the doctor was whistling *The Funeral March of a Marionette*.

Halton spent the night at a tourist lodge which was all the village boasted in the way of a hotel. Next morning he was frantically busy. He learned one interesting fact in his investigation. The three dead men, Morgan, Hunter and Kirk had been relatives. The first two were cousins and Kirk their uncle.

At noon Halton climbed the hill to the mine. Heavy timber had been used to brace the entrance to the mine. Above loomed an overhanging cliff. Near the spot where Kirk's body had been found the detective discovered a place where something had been dragged across the ground. It puzzled him at first and then he realized it might have been made in moving the body of one of the other two men who had died there.

He went through the brush searching for the spot from which the eerie wailing sound had come. At one place he found a tiny envelope not more than two inches long. It had been torn in half, but *Best Tungsten* had been printed on the bottom half of the envelope. Halton studied it thoughtfully, then he grinned. He was beginning to have a pretty good hunch regarding the wailing noise.

The county detective finally returned to the village and went to see Travers Wakely. The mine

owner was in a bad humor and still worried about his precious mine.

"No one in the village will go near the place since they've learned what's happened," he said. "And I must have someone to work it. The property is valuable, I tell you! But what good will that do me if I can't get any local help to go within a mile of it?"

"I'll stay there tonight." Brad Halton was young and strong and very sure of himself. "I'd like to see what frightened those other men."

"Good!" Wakely almost smiled, and then his petulant expression returned. "But remember that it's dangerous."

Halton nodded. He knew it was. It was hard to believe that three men had actually died from fright at the old mine.

EIGHT o'clock that night found Halton at the entrance of the old mine. It was warm and he left his coat and vest at the tourist lodge.

For an hour he sat there patiently smoking and waiting for something to happen. Finally he heard a rustling in the brush to his left. Leaping up, he drew his gun and started toward the sound.

He had only moved a few paces when something crashed down on his head from behind him. Everything went black.

Brad Halton woke to find that his arms were tightly bound to one of the bracing timbers. His mouth was gagged and he was helpless.

He heard an odd clattering sound coming from the overhanging cliff above him. Something was slowly descending, casting a strange shadow in the moonlight.

A wave of horror swept over him as he saw what it was that was slowly sliding toward him. It was a human skeleton dressed in a tattered old coat. Fleshless arms and legs rattled like castanets played by a fiend as the thing descended. It seemed to be dancing a mad dance in the air. Closer and closer it came, sightless sockets fixed on the detective's face, teeth bared in an evil grin.

For a moment Halton writhed in fear and loathing. He heard a faint click behind him and instinctively jerked his head to one side. Something shot into the collar of his blue flannel shirt.

He dug his feet into the ground and felt the ropes slide up the heavy timber to which he was bound. The ropes caught against something. He felt it with his fingers and discovered it was a bit of rough tin that had been nailed to the timber.

In front of him the skeleton danced its mad

dance. As he stared at it he realized there was a rope around its neck. From somewhere close by there came a horrible chuckle. Halton glanced in the direction of the sound. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a white face shadowed by a black hat. Then the man was gone.

Halton let his head slump forward. Slowly the skeleton was raised, disappeared. A dark form crept cautiously toward Halton.

"It worked again," the figure mumbled. "Dead—just like the other two."

The detective's right hand shot out. A hard fist crashed against the man's jaw. He reeled back in startled surprise, stumbled, and fell to the ground. Halton leaped on him before he could get to his feet, held him down.



"All right, Kirk," Halton snapped. "I've got you. You and Doctor Fell were smart, but not smart enough."

He felt a gun-bulge in the pocket of the man who had supposedly died. He yanked it out and brought the butt crashing down on Kirk's head, as he heard a sound behind him. The old man grew limp, completely out. Halton leaped to his feet and fired as flame lanced the night. A bullet soared past the detective's ear. Twenty feet away he heard a cry of pain and then the thud of a falling body. Halton realized that his bullet had brought down Doctor Fell. It was all over now.

Halton hurried to where Fell had fallen, "You win," panted Fell. "Didn't think you'd be smart enough to figure it out, but you—got us—" He shuddered and closed his eyes.

TRAVERS WAKELY came running up a few minutes later, flashlight in hand. He explained that he had been coming to the mine to see how Halton was getting along when he had heard the shooting.

"But what happened?" he demanded.

"Turn your light on my shirt collar," ordered Halton. "What's there?"

"Why, there's a long needle stuck in the

cloth," Wakely reached for it.

"Don't touch that!" snapped Halton. "It's poisoned. That's how Kirk and Fell murdered Morgan and Hunter. First they tied them to that post, then frightened them with a skeleton which they lowered from that ledge above the mine entrance. They wiggled around in their fright and their movements shot a poisoned needle into the back of their necks. Fell was the coroner; he could get away with saying they died of heart failure."

"But what was the motive?" demanded Wakely.

"They were related and Morgan and Hunter had insured their lives for ten thousand each with Kirk as the beneficiary. I guess Kirk was going to split with Doctor Fell after you and I had died in the same way."

"You mean they were going to kill me, too?" stammered Wakely. "I understand it now. Fell told me there was a trace of gold in this old coal mine. Morgan was a mining engineer and I asked him to look the place over. Then he was found dead one night. I should have realized there was something wrong. Fell suggested that I hire Hunter for a watchman then. And Kirk came and asked for the job after we discovered Hunter dead. But that cry we heard last night. That couldn't have been Kirk or Fell; they were both with us."

"No," said Halton. "But they made the noise. It was a portable phonograph that they had hidden somewhere close by. They must have taken it away this morning—but they left half an envelope that had contained phonograph needles. I found that. They staged that last death scene so that Kirk could disappear and later try to get rid of me and probably you, too. We were the only ones who had been told he was dead."

"But what made you suspect it might be something like this?" demanded Wakely.

"The way Doctor Fell acted last night," said the county detective. "I learned that Fell and Kirk had been good friends for years. Even if the doctor was hard-boiled I didn't think he would go along whistling *The Funeral March of a Marionette* if his friend was really dead. Besides, Fell was the only one who could have covered up the other deaths—and make us think Kirk was dead. They were afraid I might tumble to their little game and they decided to get me out of the way before I might begin an independent investigation. Kirk's dead body was the bait for their death-line."

Wakely snickered. "Looks like they got themselves hooked instead."