

When the Whistle Blew

Probably no other mine in southeastern Iowa has been the scene of more tales of mishaps, accidents, and tragedies than old Hocking No. 3, located in Monroe County about three miles southeast of Albia. Only the name of that particular mine needs to be mentioned to an old miner to elicit recollections of disaster.

"Oh yes, I remember that mine. Two men were trapped down there when some shots went off too soon. One of them was killed. Nobody understands why, but the other man wasn't even scratched. A big piece of slate fell right in front of him, put out his light, and trapped him in the room where he was working."

One incident in particular which happened on January 17, 1908, is vivid in the memory of every man, woman, and child who had any interest in Hocking No. 3. But this story really begins a long way from Iowa.

As waves tossed the small ship about and sprayed the deck with salt water, Albert Wester stood looking over the sullen Atlantic, apparently unmindful of the inclement weather. Kinsfolk

and Sweden were far behind. It seemed queer how little his home had changed during the four years he had been in America. Now here he was returning to his adopted country after a year's sojourn abroad. Though he cherished the memory of many happy moments of his recent visit with old friends, his mind dwelt mostly upon the future. He hoped to earn a fortune in Iowa and make a good name for himself. Most of all he dreamed of a snug little home, furnished in a manner exactly to the taste of the lovely golden-haired girl who would sing as she moved about the well-ordered rooms.

Because of these dreams, no man worked harder or more efficiently than did Wester in the year which followed. His tonnage records on the bulletin board of Hocking No. 3 recommended him as a coal miner who wasted no time. Gradually his savings grew until the dream house materialized. From time to time he bought pieces of furniture. These he would move from place to place and from room to room in his new home, determined to have them exactly where they belonged. He could shut his eyes and see his beloved Vendla sitting in that chair, or busily preparing supper at the kitchen table.

Day after day he watched for the mail, hoping for some word from across the ocean and from his

sweetheart. Sometimes he found a letter, but more often he was disappointed. Then, one day came a letter from Vendla. Eagerly he opened it. As he read, the dreams faded from his eyes, leaving a dazed, uncertain look, as if darkness had obscured the world. Vendla was not coming in the spring. Instead, she was going to marry a handsome and prosperous young farmer whose land joined that of her uncle in Sweden.

In the evening Wester went to work, hardly seeing the familiar landscape, the machinery of the mine, or the faces of the miners who greeted him as they passed. Something vital was lost. Perhaps it was the urge to work for a purpose. Perhaps it was the monopoly of his mind by a single thought — Vendla was not coming. During the day he had tried to appear natural as if nothing unusual had happened. At meal times particularly he had done some good acting — making jokes and keeping the other boarders in gales of laughter. He was determined that no one should guess how grievously he had been hurt.

So the hours passed. Task after task was assigned to him by his uncle, Magnus Hansen, who was also the night pit boss and who considered Wester one of the best workers in the mine. But again and again he bungled his work, making

mistakes inexcusable for a miner of his experience and ability.

"Hey you, Al!" shouted Maggie Hansen. "Is there nothing you can do right to-night? Look what you've done there. You better yet go load up those tools we want."

Wester mounted in the cage to the surface and began to pile tools and lumber into a car. Having collected the necessary equipment, he wheeled the car toward the shaft and the cage which was to take them down to the waiting miners. His eyes were dim with tears that had to be wiped surreptitiously away. He could hardly see as he pushed the car to the top of the shaft. Suddenly he felt himself falling, amid a rain of picks, axes, augers, and timbers. Far below, only twenty feet above the bottom of the shaft, was the cage which should have been at the surface. He grasped the tool car desperately. Then, mercifully, came oblivion.

Four sharp blasts of the whistle brought every man, woman, and child in Hocking out of doors, with fear in their hearts. That signal meant that some one at the mine had been hurt. Small boys who were skating on the nearby pond stood still, too frightened to go on with their fun.

Down in the entrance to the mine at the bottom of the shaft, 385 feet below the surface, pit boss Hansen called for some one to climb with him up

the side of the shaft to the cage and rescue Wester. Occasionally a pick or an ax, temporarily embedded in the plank sides of the shaft, loosened and fell upon the top of the cage. Any man who attempted to climb that wall would be risking his life, and the miners knew it. They hesitated to follow the example of their boss. Finally "Nigger" Harris spoke: "I'm with you, Maggie. Let's go."

Up the side of the shaft toiled the black man and the white, sticking their toes into the narrow spaces between the planks and wondering whether the next tool which fell would come in their direction.

Neither man ever said much about the ghastly sight which met their eyes as they finally climbed above the top of the cage. Wester was beyond help. No work was done at the mine on the following day.

"Last Friday evening a shocking accident occurred at Hocking No. 3 shaft", reported the *Albia Republican*. "The men were going into the mine for the night shift and the cages were making the necessary trips for that purpose.

"Albert Wester was in charge of a pit car containing a load of tools, including picks, shovels, etc., and evidently thinking that the cage in which he and the car were to make the descent was

awaiting him at the ground landing, he pushed the car down the track, opened the shaft door, and shoved the car into what he supposed was the cage. But the cage was not there. In fact it was 266 feet below the surface, and the car of tools went pell mell over the edge and down, down, to the cage, pulling the young man with it. Just why he did not notice the absence of the cage when opening the door is not easily accounted for, as it was moonlight and there was no steam or fog to prevent, but his mind was probably on something else, and being so sure that the cage was there he never thought to look. Then, too, he might have turned the car loose when he discovered the mistake, but it was done so quickly that he was not on his guard and did not notice the mistake until too late to catch his balance. Nobody saw the accident and nobody knows just how or why it occurred, only that he went down with the car of tools and was horribly mangled, being cut and torn into four pieces, and was no doubt dead before striking the bottom.

"He was a popular young man, 31 years of age and unmarried. He was making his home with Mr. and Mrs. Magnus Hansen who considered him practically one of the family, Mrs. Hansen being his aunt. He first came here from Sweden in 1902 and remained until 1906, when he went

back on a visit to his folks, remaining there until May, 1907, when he returned and resumed his work at Hocking. He was industrious and saving and had built a nice house in Hocking No. 3 . . ."

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