

# The Whistling Ghost

Written by: Harold Scott, Sr.

*Big Bill Hurley was a flamboyant miner who lost his life in a mining accident, and then as a spirit prowled the slopes and rooms of Old Union Mine No. 1, near Frostburg, Maryland, the mine where he had worked.*

Coal mining at one time was one of the major industries of Western Allegany County, Maryland. Throughout the George's Creek are filled with reports of numerous injuries and deaths which resulted from mine and mine-related accidents.

On June 10, 1892, a mine foreman of the Consolidated Coal Company's Old Union No. 1, began boarding up the entrance to the "worked out" mine. Ten years previous Big Bill Hurley had worked at this mine and was called "the wickedest man in Maryland." There were some pretty wicked men at that time in the mining district of Allegany County, but Big Bill Hurley was the star that outshone them all. He reeked with tobacco and profanity, he drank, gambled, scoffed at man and God, defiant in his devilry until death overtook him.

Hurley was a good miner, if a bad man. And when the company determined to drive a heading up from the lower level and tap the water accumulated in the upper working, he was put in charge of the work. He pushed it ahead well and rapidly, keeping the "shifts" of men going day and night. In about five weeks the work was nearly done, and the men knew it was almost completed.

On the last day Jeff, a most cautious miner, who was one of the four men of the shift then at work, advised the use of an eight-foot auger to prospect ahead for water. He said he knew they were near it and he feared it was dangerous to still go it blind. But Hurley refused to send for the auger, saying with an oath of profanity, that there would be plenty of time to use it tomorrow.

The words had hardly been uttered when the mass of coal in front was seen to bulge with the weight of the

water just behind, and with a wild cry, the men at work jumped back and ran for their lives, while the ink-black flood that burst out through the weakened wall of coal came surging at their heels. They were heading in the wrong direction, Aden was in the lead. He turned up an old working that the heading crossed at right angles and close behind him followed the other men of the shift, Jeff, Frank, and Henry. In their rear, swearing at every step came Big Bill Hurley. At the end of the cross cut, some one hundred yards up, the men threw themselves, panting and moaning, against its end—the solid coal. In one moment they saw they had taken a wrong turn. Jeff was the first to voice this terrible reality.

"My God," he cried, "we should have gone down the heading. The water will rise to this and we shall be drowned like rats!"

As he spoke, squeaking with terror and wet with water that was following fast, an army of rats, came clambering up the coal and clung to the shivering men, shivering like themselves. The horror stricken miners gave no thought to this added terror of the time. Death was too near. Already they could see the black stream slowly rising, blocking the entry to where they were. Their only hope had been that the water would run off with this backing up. But the outlet of the heading to the sump they saw was not sufficient, and this hope fled as they saw the water rise.

Not for one instant had Bill Hurley ceased his horrible blasphemy of the Almighty, doubly horrible here where death reached out of the damp and seemed to touch these fugitives of the flood, deep down beneath the earth.

"Let us pray," said Aden.

"Never," bawled out Bill Hurley, with an added oath. "There'll be no meowing here. We'll go to hell howling and defy the devil!" And a volley of oaths more foul than even any he had yet uttered rounded out the sentence. But the other anguished men paid no heed to him as they knelt, with clasped hands, in a little circle of light one single miner's lamp yet shed. High and clear the voice of Aden rose in prayer. And the water continued to rise steadily.

About twenty feet of their refuge remained dry, and on this narrow strip Bill Hurley paced and whistled out a wild tune of his own to drown out the sounds of prayer.

"Oh, God, receive our souls!" the invocation ended. Then followed one high and mocking note of the whistle, that ended in a shriek as, with a crash like thunder, the mine roof above Bill Hurley fell full on him, even as he blasphemed, and his life went out within four feet of those who prayed, but were unhurt.

The fall of the coal and shale from the roof formed an impervious dam across Bill Hurley's body and the narrow cross cut. Before the water reached the top of this, its force was spent and the pressure lessened from behind. The water started slowly to recede and run back down the heading to the sump. At dusk, outside, the four living were greeted as from the grave by the search party seeking for what they feared to find.

The fall of coal that had struck Big Bill Hurley, had, with his body, been the means of saving the lives of the men who prayed. The body was taken out the next day and work resumed. But, at that hour, ever after, the sounds of Hurley's footsteps were heard, and high above them in the dark, his shrill discordant whistle. His soul in penance walked and whistled, and the awed and idle heard sounds for years as Hurley's ghost walked and whistled in the cold narrow mine.



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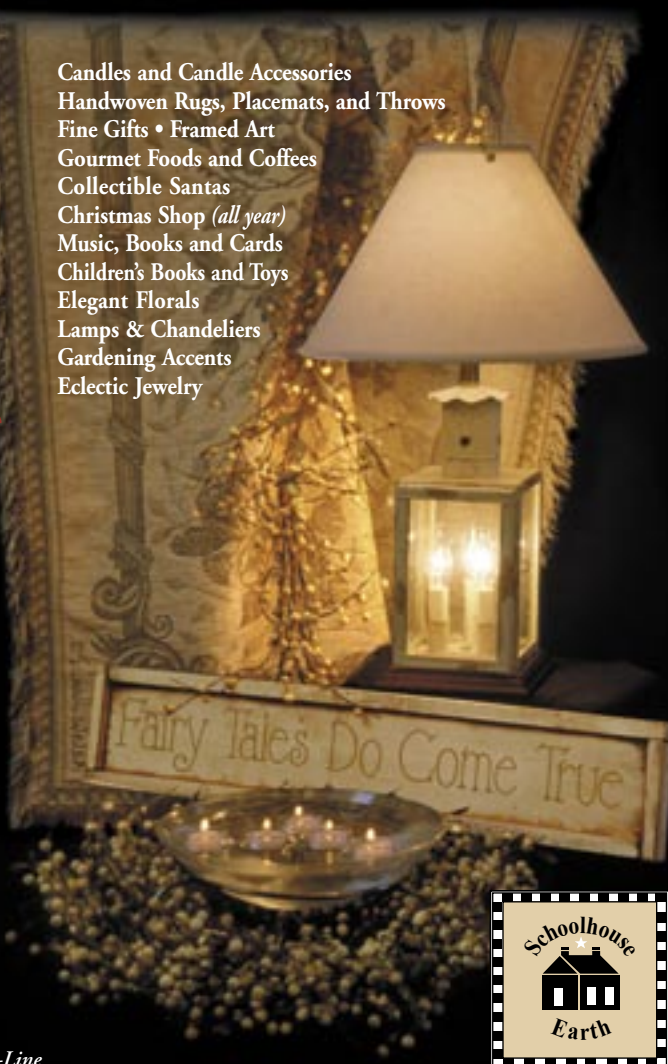
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