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Dead-End Drift

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

THE TRICKLE of sand ceased, and there was silence. Then a small rock dropped from the hanging wall into the rubble of waste beneath, and the flat finality of the sound put a period to the moment.

There was a heavy odor of dust, and one of the men coughed, the dry, hacking cough of miner's consumption. Silence hung heavily in the thick, dead air.

"Better sit still." Bert's voice was quiet and unexcited. "I'll make a light." They waited, listening to the miner fumbling with his hand lamp. "We might dislodge something and start it again."

They heard his palm strike the lamp, and then an arrow of flame leaped from the burner. The sudden change from the impenetrable darkness of the drift-end to the bright glare of the miner's lamp left them blinking. They sat very still, staring at each other. The suddenness of the disaster had stunned them into quiet acceptance.

Frank's breathing made a hoarse, ugly sound, and when their eyes turned to him they could see the dark, spreading stain on his shirt front, the queer bulge of his broken body. He was a powerful man, his blond, curly hair above a square, hard face. There was blood on the rocks near him, and on a jagged boulder he had rolled from his body after the cave-in.

There was a trickle of blood across Bert's face from a scalp wound, but no other injuries to anyone. Their eyes evaded the wall of muck across the drift, their minds filled with awareness.

"Hurt bad?" Bert knelt by Frank. "Looks like that big one hit you."

"Yeah," Frank's voice was sullen. "I'm stove up inside, feels like."

"Better leave him alone," Joe said. "The bleeding seems to be letting up. There ain't nothing we can do."

Frank wet his lips. "That's right." His body was a dead weight, and he stared down at it curiously. "I guess I'm bad hurt."

He turned his head deliberately, and stared at the muck-pile. The cave-in left a slanting pile of muck that reached toward them along the drift, cutting them off completely from the outside world, from light and air. Behind them was the rocky face of the drift where Rody had been drilling. From the face to the muck-pile it was only a matter of a few feet. Frank wet his lips, remembering the drift beyond the obstruction.

It couldn't have been the drift alone. Beyond was the Big Stope. He reached over and turned out the light. The flame winked once, and then darkness was there.

"What's the idea?" Joe demanded.

"Air," Frank said shortly. "There's four of us, and there ain't going to be too much. We may be some time getting out."

"If we get out," Joe said.

Rody shifted his weight on the slab where he sat, and they heard the movement, the rasping of the coarse denim. "How far do you reckon she caved, Frank?"

"Don't know. Maybe the Big Stope went."

"Yeah," Rody was thoughtful. "If it did we might as well fold up. There ain't going to be anybody able to open that stope before we kick off. There ain't much air in here for four men."

"I told Tom about that stope," Joe said. "He ain't had no right to have men working in here. It was too big in the first place, too damn' much weight on the stulls. The posts were counter-sunk into the laggin' all of two inches, like a knife in butter."

"We're here now," Bert said. "No use to kick. That stope was better'n a hundred feet across. If any part of it went, it all went, you can figure on that. There's a hundred

feet of tunnel to drive and timber, and working in loose muck ain't going to help."

No one spoke. In the utter blackness and stillness of the drift, they waited. There was no light, no sound. All had been cut off from them. Joe wiped the sweat from his face with a rough hand. The utter blackness of a place without light always got him. At night, no matter how dark, there is always some light, and sooner or later the eyes adjust themselves. Here there was no light, and a man was completely blind.

And no sound. Only two hundred feet to the surface, yet it might have been two thousand. Two hundred feet of stone above them, before them the whole weight of the mountain, behind them the splintered and broken timbers buried beneath another mountain of waste.

On the surface there would be tense, hard faces. The skip would be coming down now, the forces on top would be girding for the struggle with the mountain. Men would be gathering, equipment and forces arranged. Around the collar of the shaft would be a clear space, and behind the hoist the engineer would be waiting to send the skip down with its weight of rescuers. Near the warehouse men would be standing, and women. And down here they could only wait, and hope.

"Got a chew, Bert?" Joe asked.

"Yeah." Bert pushed his hand out in the darkness, feeling for Joe's. Their hands were steady. Joe bit off a chew, and passed it back, their hands fumbling in the dark again.

"We ain't got a chance," Rody exclaimed suddenly. "She might have caved clear to the station. Anyway, they couldn't get through in time. We ain't got air to last five hours."

"Forget it," Joe said. "You wouldn't do nothing but blow your check on that frowsy blond in Kingman if you was out."

"I was a sap for ever coming to work in this lousy hole," Rody said, his voice surly. "I was a sap."

"Quit crabbing," Bert interrupted. "You're here now, you got to like it."

"Say," Frank's deep voice lifted loudly in the darkness, the sound harshened by pain. "Any you guys worked in Thirty-Seven?"

"You mean that raise on the Three-Hundred?" Bert asked. "Sure, I put in a couple of shifts there."

"Aren't we right over it now?"

"Huh?" Joe moved quickly. "How high up were they?"

"I haven't been in there in a month," Bert said. "How high up were they, Frank?"

"Better than ninety feet," he said carefully. He held his voice tightly, afraid to breathe deep. He couldn't tell what was wrong, but his body was numb, and there was a growing pain in his belly.

"Then it ain't more than ten feet below us!" Joe fumbled in the darkness for a pick. "If we could dig down—"

"Ten feet? In that rock?" Rody sneered. "Don't be a sap. You couldn't dig it with a pick in a week. Anyway, Thirty-Seven ain't this far in. We're thirty yards beyond it, at least."

"No," Frank said. "We're right over it. Anyway, it's a chance. It's more than we got now."

Bert got up. They heard him fumbling for a pick. "Better move back against that muck-pile," he said. "I'm digging."

"You're a sap," Rody said. "You ain't got a chance."

"Shut up." Joe's voice was ugly. "If you ain't willing to try, go to hell. I want out of here."

"Who says shut up?" Rody got up and started crawling toward Joe. "I ain't never had no use for you, you—"

"Listen," Frank said suddenly. "I got a pick handle, Rody. You go back where you were and shut-up. This is a hell of a time to start something."

A light flared in Frank's hand, and the injured man

hitched himself a little higher. "That's right, Bert. Start right there. Some of that top stuff will flake off."

The sweat stood out along his white face. One big hand clutched the pick handle. Slowly his eyes shifted from face to face. He looked at Rody longest. The short, thick-set man's black hair curled stiffly back from a low forehead. He was almost as broad as Frank, and thicker.

The sudden blows of the pick sounded, pounding into their brains with measured beat, throbbing with the throb of their blood, pounding with the even pound of their pulses. Joe shifted, watching the swing of the pick. The flame of the carbide light ate into the air, burning steadily.

Bert stopped, wiping his brow. He had scarcely scratched the surface. "She's damn' hard. Going to take the point off this pick in a hurry."

"We got four of them," Frank said. The whole front of him from groin to breast-bone was one dark stain. "I always carry a pick in a mine."

Bert swung again, and they watched silently as the point of the pick flaked back a thin crust of rock. The surface was partially shattered during the driving of the drift. It would be harder below.

Frank's big hands lay relaxed and loose. He watched the swing of the pick, and when Joe got up to spell Bert, he said to him, "Anybody on top waiting for you?"

"Uh-huh," Joe swallowed. "A girl."

Rody started to say something, but caught Frank's eye, and settled back, trying to move out of reach of the pick handle.

"My wife's up there," Bert said. "I got three kids." He took off his shirt and wiped the sweat from his body with it. Then he leaned back, breathing deeply.

"What do you suppose is happening out there?" he said, sitting up. "I'd give a lot to know."

"Depends on how far it caved," Joe said. "Probably they're shoring her up around the station, or in the opening of the Big Stope."

He swung the pick, and then again. A small chunk of rock broke loose, and he kicked it aside. Joe swung the pick from an angle, breaking loose another chunk. Bert panted in the semi-darkness, and Big Frank sat silent, his face cold and hard in the reflected glow.

It was going to be a long job, a very long job. And the air was bad. It was close and hot, the sweat streaming from his body in tiny rivulets, running into his eyes and dripping from his chin. Steadily and methodically he swung his pick, deadened to everything except the shock of the heavy blows, the work before him. Once, Bert started to relieve him, but he shook his head. He was started now, it was an infection in his blood.

Then he did give way to Bert. He sat back on the rocks, panting, striving for breath in the thick, dead air. He tried to keep from remembering Mary, but she was always there, always just beyond the blows of his pick. Probably she didn't even know what had happened to them, what this thing was that had come into their lives.

She would be at work now, and it might be hours before they heard of the cave-in, before she heard that Joe was one of those either dead or entombed behind a wall of muck. It would be her tragedy as well as his. Joe cursed. Tomorrow they were to have gone to the doctor. He was reliable, Frank had told him, a good man, not a quack.

Big Frank knew about Mary. He knew that with every drive of the pick it would be a closer thing for her. There were four of them here, but outside were Mary, and Bert's wife and kids. It would be a close thing, anyway you looked at it. He, Joe, could take it. He'd never done anything else. But Mary was in a strange town, with few friends, and unless they got to the doctor. . . .

They were fools to have gone on when they knew they were taking a chance. But a fellow never knew about things like this. Everything had been all right until the roof fell in. When the hanging wall came down, that had been the first thought in his mind. What about Mary?

"Better take a blow," Frank said. "We got some time."

Joe sat down again, and Bert across from him. "Maybe we better work in the dark," Joe suggested. "That flame cuts down on the air. You guys keep back, and we could manage okay. It ain't as if we were moving around."

"Yeah," Frank agreed. "I think that's a good idea." He looked weak, and his face was drawn. His mouth was tight with suffering.

They sat silent, the sweat streaming down their faces and bodies. Joe rubbed his face. His eyes shifted to Frank, then uneasily back to Bert. He wiped his face again, and his eyes turned to the muck-pile, dark and ominous.

"Think we'll make it, Frank?" He was remembering Mary. What would she do now? How could she face it alone? It wasn't as if they were married. It was going to be tough. "Think we'll make it?" he asked.

"Yeah," Frank's voice was dry. "Sure, we'll make it."

"Listen!" Bert sat up eagerly. "I think I hear them! Isn't that a pick?"

They listened, every muscle tense. There was nothing; somewhere, far away in the mine, some muck shifted. Frank reached over and doused the light. The darkness closed in, empty, silent, heavy with heat and dead air. There was no vibrancy here, no life.

In the darkness they heard Joe get up, then the sodden blows of his pick. He worked on and on; his muscles heavy with weariness, he worked. Each blow and each recovery an effort. Then Bert relieved him. Almost soundlessly they changed places. Immediately, Bert could see the difference, could see that the air was closer now. It was harder to breathe, his lungs labored, and his heart seemed to pound. He felt the battering blows of it would break through the walls of his body. Once he stopped, and held a hand over it.

Long since they'd thrown two of the picks aside, their points worn away. The hole was getting deeper though. Once a bit of muck fell from the hanging wall, and Bert

held himself, his stomach tight against the crash he believed would follow, but there was none.

Rody moved over suddenly. He reached his hand toward the pick. Joe stepped back, and Bert hesitated. In the blackness he knew Rody had moved.

"Let me have it," Rody said. "Hell, it's better than sittin' here suckin' my thumb. Give me the pick."

Bert passed it to him, their hands fumbling. Then he staggered to the muck-pile and fell at full-length, breathing hoarsely. Rody swung the pick, and then again, savagely. The sweat ran into his eyes, but he swung again, his jaw set, his heart murderous. He felt an exultant fury in the power of his driving blows. Steadily, he worked.

Once he stopped, his deep chest working like a bellows. He turned toward Frank, and spoke into the darkness. "How's it, Big Boy?"

"Okay," Frank's voice was sullen with a bite of pain. "You're a good man, Rody."

Rody swelled his chest, and the pick swung easily in his thick hands. The hole was deep now. He could hear Frank's hoarse breath. All of them were lying now but the worker. The air was better close to the muck.

"Hear anything?" It was Bert. "How long would it take, Frank?"

"Depends on how much it caved." The numbness was gone now, his body throbbed with pain. He held himself tightly against it, his big body holding its pain like some great animal.

"Say!" Joe exclaimed suddenly. "What about the air pipe for the liner? There might be some. Maybe she didn't bust."

Stumbling in his eagerness he fell across the muck, accidentally bumping Frank and jerking an involuntary grunt of pain from him. Then Joe fell to his knees and began clawing at the compressed air valve under the muck. He found it, and then cleared the vent, unscrewing the broken hose to the liner. Trembling, he turned the valve.

The cool air shot into the room, then sighed away to nothing.

"It was a little," Joe said. "It'll help."

"Yeah," Rody said, "damned little!"

"How deep are you?" Frank asked. He shifted his body, and they heard him catch himself with a quick gasp.

"Four feet, maybe five," Joe returned. "She's tough going."

Joe lay on his face against the foot-wall. The air was close and hot, his lungs labored heavily like a wind-broken horse. The light and air were a memory now, a memory almost beyond the reach of consciousness. At times he felt himself slipping, and yet he knew there was still time to go.

How long had it been? None of them had a watch, and there was no way of calculating the passage of time. It seemed years since they had heard the sudden slip, and the reverberating crash. Somehow it was so different than he had suspected it would be. At times during the months he had worked, he would stop to look around at the rock walls of the drifts, or at the heavy stulls, and the twelve-by-twelves. He had always believed that a crash would come with a thundering roar, and then it had been just the opposite. There had been a splintering sound, a slide of muck, then the long sliding of more tons of muck behind. A little dust, a falling stone, and they were entombed. They had lacked even the consolation of drama.

Whatever was to come of it wouldn't be long now. Whatever happened must happen soon. There was no sound, no breath of moving air, no movement, only the stillness, the thick, sticky air so heavy with the odor of breathing.

Rody was sitting on the edge of the pit. Joe could hear him move. He could hear Frank's heavy lungs reaching for air. Slowly, he got up. His legs felt heavy.

"Let me," Joe said, pawing at Rody. "I'll dig."

Rody moved under his hand, leaving it wet from his thick, sweaty shoulder. Then Joe swung the pick. Slowly, methodically, sullenly, he swung the pick.

After awhile he stopped. "Hear anything?" Bert asked.

They listened, and there was no sound.

"Maybe they ain't tryin'," Bert said dully. "Maybe they think we're dead."

"Yeah," Rody agreed. "Can you imagine that guy Tom Chambers spending good money to get us out of here? He don't care. They's lots of miners."

Joe mopped his face, and his hand trembled. Every time he tried to hope he remembered those weighted timbers in the Big Stope. Nothing could hold that mass once it started to go. On top there would be a silent ring of watchers, women and children, mostly. Still, not so many as in Nevada that time. Here only Bert, Rody, and he had women to wait. And Rody's wouldn't care.

The dull thud of the pick sounded again. It was Rody. Joe could tell by the power in the blows. He listened, his mind lulled into a sort of hypnotic twilight where there was only darkness and the measured sound of the pick.

Suddenly, Rody stoped. "Hey!" he said. "Listen!" He swung again, and there was a dull sound, a hollow sound. "That ain't no ten feet!"

Something broke over Joe like a cold shower. They were going to break through into Thirty-Seven. Rody was swinging the pick viciously now. Bert crowded to the edge of the hole.

"Let's have some light," Rody said. He was grimly matter-of-fact now. Frank's light glowed again, and the flame reached hungrily at the air, then shrank to a tiny flicker.

Rody swung, and suddenly the pick went through. It caught him off balance and he fell forward. Catching his balance, he knocked out a bigger hole. The cool air rushed into the hot drift-end, and the men sat back, breathing deeply.

"Take it easy, you guys, when you go down." Frank's voice was unchanged. "That ladder may have been shaken loose by blasting or the cave-in. The top is on the left-

hand side of the raise. You'll have to drop to the staging though, and it is anyway ten feet."

He tossed a stone down the hole, and they heard it strike against the boards below. The flame of the light grew brighter now as more air entered the hole. Frank stared at them, breathing deeply.

"Come on, Rody," Joe said. "Lend a hand, we got to get Frank to a doctor."

"No," Frank's voice was impersonal. "You can't get me to that platform. I'm stove up too bad. I'd bleed to death before you got me down the raise. You guys go ahead. When they get the drift opened up will be time enough for me. I'll just sit here."

"But—," Joe hesitated.

"Beat it," Frank said.

Bert lowered himself down the opening, and they heard him drop to the platform. Then Rody followed. Joe stopped, rubbing his face. He looked at Frank, but the big man only stared, sullenly, into the wall.

"Frank—," he stopped. "Well, gee—" he said.

For a moment he stood silent, then he lowered himself into the hole. He hung for a minute on his elbows. "Frank—" he said. "I wish—" He let go and dropped to the platform.

The carbide light burned lower, and the flame flickered. Big Frank's face twisted as he moved, and his mouth opened very wide. Then he leaned back, staring toward the pile of muck, his big hands relaxed and empty.