

Horror

James G. Campbell

THE MORNING shift is just coming to work. The elevator is rising from the bottom of the mine. It is a typical spring morning; the sky is a cloudless blue; the grass is getting high enough so that in a few days it will receive its first mowing; the birds have just completed their annual return flight and are now busy getting food and building materials for their nests in expectation of their young ones. The air is warm, and the beautiful weather is the main topic of conversation. Everything takes place according to the daily schedule; the night shift then descends down into the cold sun-less atmosphere of a coal mine. On a day like this, it is difficult to comprehend that at any moment the tranquility of the settlement will be turned into complete chaos. In the small town that surrounds the mine, the mothers are just settling down for their second cup of coffee after getting their husbands and children off to their appointed places. The manager of the general store is just sweeping off the sidewalk in front before the day's trading begins. Suddenly, the entire community is filled with utter despair; many of the citizens fall to their knees in prayer. This change in the settlement is brought about by the horn and siren atop the elevator tower at the mine. This signal can mean only one thing to the residents—fire and an explosion in the depths of the mine. The women run frantically into the streets, not knowing which direction to go after they are out. They finally begin making their long trudge to the area beneath the tower of the horn and siren.

Black smoke is still stirring from the elevator shaft and ventilation openings as the searchers and possible rescuers begin their descent with air tanks strapped to their backs and lights fixed in their hands. Now there is nothing left to do except wait and pray and wait some more. Many of the older citizens recall the last time they heard this dreaded signal, and that time thirty-five loved ones were brought from the darkness never to breathe or love again. Shortly after the blast, the state patrolmen begin arriving with their sirens penetrating the once-serene morning air. Newspapermen and photographers are on the scene interviewing and taking pictures of the miners' families. Finally, after two hours of anxious waiting, the crowd once again becomes tense as they press against the barricades to get a glimpse of the first victims that are being brought up. After learning of the fate of their loved ones, some cry, some just stare out into space. Others react violently and are given a sedative by an attending physician. In some instances, there are reunions such as there have never been before. One woman presses especially close to the ropes because she recognizes her husband's checkered shirt on the arm hanging over the side of a stretcher. Her two small children have been unable to understand why their mother has been

crying ever since the devastating alarm went off. She clutches the two small ones in her arms and makes her way through the crowd while trying to make the stretcher attendants hear her trembling voice.

Finally, she reaches the stretcher and the children realize what all of the excitement is about. They recognize their father lying on the stretcher; his face is completely covered with soot and grime; his eyebrows and the front of his hair are singed down to mere stubbles. Both of his legs are tied to the stretcher because at the time of the explosion one of the supporting timbers fell across the lower part of his body. His wife nearly collapses when she first sees his injured body, but she soon regains her old strength plus some additional strength when she is told that he is only slightly injured. In other cases the victims have not been as lucky, and some bodies are brought up covered with a sheet or a blanket. Old women and recent brides learn at the same time of their loved one's future. Some find out fairly soon while others have to wait until the rescuers have made several trips. The majority of the families have happy reunions. Of the eighty-seven men in the mine at the time of the blast, only five will not return the following morning to once again descend into the depths.

The Handiwork of Age

Rita Anweiler

CAREFULLY opening the rickety drawer of an old mahogany dresser, I notice a small, yellowish Bible atop a cluttered stack of musty papers. The Bible's battered cover, cracked by the hands of time, resembles an aged man's face upon which are embedded deep lines. Each zigzag wrinkle etched upon this gilded cover is intricately interwoven into a myriad of delicate patterns. Along the frayed edges, unravelled threads suspend helplessly like the silky hairs of a spider's cobweb swaying gently in the breeze. The Bible's warped back reveals a binding that has become threadbare and timeworn from constant use, as the land becomes eroded from the constant tortures of the weather. At the bottom of this cover a tiny, plain cross, chained to a rusty zipper, no longer pulls the zipper shut.

Inside the Bible a bulk of yellow, wrinkled paper replaces the once smooth, white pages. This faded background, like a dim light, obscures the bold-faced print upon the pages but accentuates the numerous passages underscored in red. Brief notes, once painstakingly jotted along narrow margins, are now blurred as if smudged by the fingers of time. The remaining withered pages reveal crumpled corners and nicked edges like the jagged outline of a rocky cliff. Thus, time displays her handiwork, leaving only the inscription "Holy Bible" distinctly engraved in gold letters on the outside flap.