

BENEATH
THE
CRUST

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BY

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

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PREAMBLE

IT IS NOT IN MY NATURE

to manufacture events or daring exploits to further my good name and public standing - nor do I seek to unjustly elevate my person above the next man in any way.

That said - the events and circumstances I am about to relate here are of a nature and magnitude of importance that my humble person will inevitably be forced unto the public stage and become the object of vexatious praise and notoriety, and my name will surely - and regretfully - become a household one in all of polite and educated society.

THE AUTHOR.



I first came into contact with Professor Brown through a curious advertisement in the local paper, seeking contact with a person of my description - a man of action with an inclination for adventure and escapades, and also for new scientific discovery. A tall, strong, well-dressed and handsome man with an agile mind and a glint of devilish charm in every smile.

Prof. Brown himself was a most unassuming and weak-tempered man. Perhaps not a natural leader, but the role regretfully fell to him as he provided the financial grounds for the operation - which he incidentally had been planning for a number of years.

The idea was one of exploration - not of any as yet unmapped areas on the planet's surface, but of the hidden territories below. For centuries man has burrowed the bedrock in search of gold, precious stones and other materials, but who had dared to continue the search beyond that? Who had gone in pursuit of hollows and caves not connected with the upper regions - in search of the subterranean habitats of yet unknown species of animals, perhaps hominids or other beings of similar persuasion and breeding to ourselves?

The Professor had also established connections with two other gentlemen hired for the expedition. One who presented himself as a pilot and spelunker who dabbled in the science of language and had a background in manual labour as a mining engineer, and another man who had been hired to realise the somewhat fanciful schemes the professor had dreamed up for an underground exploration vessel.

Months passed without much happening, and then one day detailed plans had been made and a rock-piercing vessel had been manufactured and was ready to launch. I was summoned and promptly arrived at the professor's doorstep, but not before stopping by at my trusted clothier to pick up the tailor-made exploration suit I had ordered just weeks before. I came well prepared.

My crew mates had put less effort into their choice of garments, which rather spoiled the sense of occasion on my part, but I rather feel I made up for their shortcomings with my tweed ensemble, a sporty homburg and a set of well-polished derbys.

As the countdown began, I stepped forth to please the snapping cameras, smiled and waved with all my strength to compensate for my colleagues' retiring and camera-shy ways - until I was hastily ushered by them into the cabin and fastened to my seat in a rather brusque manner.

A series of flashing lights went off before me as the terrifying roar of the engine sounded and the vessel was set in motion. My travelling companions seemed unperturbed and carried out their mysterious duties with admirable aplomb. I would have joined them, but for one unfortunate circumstance: my nerves got the better of me, and I passed out, only to wake up several days later. I found myself lying in a bunk bed, relieved of my attire and apparently running a fever. Droplets of salty water appeared on my brow and chin - a most uncomfortable sensation, and very unbecoming!

Still, of all the crew I was the one least marked by the passage through the Earths' crust. The pilot had soot marks all about, the professor's hair was standing on end, and his jacket was torn at the sleeves and was soiled by earthen materials somehow picked up from the surroundings.

Now, to the matter of our meal arrangements I would like to add the following comment: they were inadequate. Food stuff was prepared and served under the most primitive conditions and on quite substandard china. I was never able to get a hold of the cook, but instead was instructed to address my complaints to the professor himself, who before every meal appeared in a costume which approximated the protective robes worn by kitchen staff. The whole thing was initially hilarious, but the effect wore off on repetition, until one day when I was suddenly struck with the realisation that the good professor was actually the one preparing the meals - and had been doing so the whole time! A most amusing whim!

I spent my days in bed, reading and smoking, while my colleagues busied themselves with an endless assortment of trivial and undignified activities. After a while they must have forgotten about me - and for several hours - even days - left me completely to my own devices while they moved about outside the craft, hobnobbing with the locals and taking notes on their customs and traditions. With what audience in mind, I ask.

On their return to our vessel, they expressed a sudden eagerness to leave the current premises with immediacy, casting anxious looks both left and right while breathing in a hurried way and perspiring profusely. I concurred, having finished my last copy of *The Gentleman Fisher* and on my last shards of tobacco.

The engine was fired up in the usual manner - don't ask me about the details - and we soon found ourselves traveling in a trajectory aimed at altitudes more befitting of the human constitution.

Upon arrival on the Earth's surface, I immediately stepped out of our vessel, bid my comrades goodbye and hailed a carriage to bring me home. By mid-afternoon I arrived and was greeted by Stephens in the usual manner. He had been expecting me and had just moments before finished running a bath and instructing the kitchen on how to proceed in the event of my arrival - as he had evidently been doing every day for at least a fortnight! Good man, Stephens.

FINALE

The adventures described above, the hardship, the effort and the sense of ultimate triumph I'm sure could never be fully appreciated by the common man, but to me they were real, and all of it will stay with me for as long as I shall live: the sounds, the heat - slightly above room temperature - and the strain - for instance waking up and being forced to partake in breakfast at an hour decided on by some person other than oneself! But most of all I shall remember the relief when stepping out of the small vessel, onto the landing - and finding a forgotten stash of finest pipe tobacco in one of my pockets - I was finally able to breathe in again the invigorating and nourishing fumes that only a trusted and well-worn pipe can produce!

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