

Lemuel

**Recollections
of the famous
subterranean
excursion
known as
»The Brown
Expedition«**



RECOLLECTIONS OF
THE FAMOUS
SUBTERRANEAN
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By
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THESE RECOLLECTIONS WERE put to paper several years after the events described here. My memory is generally fair to adequate, but some details may have been distorted by the passing of time. I am aware that there are other memoirs written by expedition members which give somewhat differing accounts to mine. I'm not a trained medical professional - although I have acted as such on many instances (for which I have dutifully served my sentence), but I would nevertheless like to offer an explanation. Below ground, thousands of feet down, conditions are harsh. Noxious fumes cloud the mind, humidity and lighting conditions dull the senses. There may also be other explanations. Lust for glory. Academic ambition. Madness.

This is my story.

IN HIS WRITTEN works, I always found professor Brown to be a rather incomprehensible and unfocused thinker, but every time he spoke in public he always left a very favourable impression on his audience. They might not have grasped exactly what the professor was getting at, but they always walked away with a firm conviction in him and an appreciation for the importance of his work - and an eagerness to make a substantial monetary contribution to his future endeavours.

There was no lack of funds, I was told, when professor Brown summoned me on that late autumn day. He had turned to me to construct a large vessel that could carry a crew of up to ten men (or possibly women) on a journey below the Earth's crust. He had very precise requests as to the layout of the kitchen and the sleeping accommodations - not too comfortable, but enough for a fully grown man (or woman) to get a reasonably good night's sleep. He also had ideas about the shelving in the library and the lighting in the reading-room. The rest of the construction was left to me, including the method of propulsion and the means by which the craft would penetrate both earth, solid rock and red-hot magma.

Came the day of the launch, and I was introduced to the rest of the crew. Mr Norris I knew from before. We sometimes frequent the same social establishments in the city, and he seldom fails to embarrass either himself or his company with his sudden and impulsive utterances of the most bizarre kind. I have never cared for his company, but I decided to endure it, in the name of science.

The Viscount struck me as a curious fellow. Clearly out of place, and he immediately gave the impression that he did not take notice of anything or any person he encountered. I politely queried him as to his academic credentials, which he claimed were impressive, but when asked about details, he became vague and distracted. I did not see much of him for the duration of the journey.

Then there were the pair of young hotheads, Bill and Bergman, always falling into each others' speech, but never finishing a thought. They were a spirited pair, and I would like to have seen more of them, but unfortunately they eloped into a tunnel mid-journey to dedicate themselves to spiritual development and homosexuality.

One fellow memoir writer claims there was also an animal present on the expedition. There may very well have been, but if so, every remnant of the thing has since then evaporated from my memory.

In the professor's estimation, there was no need for a test run. The expedition itself was after all an experiment. Using untested equipment was all in the spirit of exploration that the professor wanted to bring to this adventure. So it was with some trepidation that I fired up the engine, pushed the "FORWARD" lever, and then proceeded to press the "START" button.

The engine went off with a deafening noise, and the craft started to move along the ground. Surprisingly slow, I remember thinking. By mid-afternoon we reached the tunnel that we had selected for the descent into the underworld. A solemn silence fell upon the crew as we rolled into the darkness. The craft itself was anything but silent, though, and the confined space around it compounded to make it almost unbearable for the hired hands who scurried alongside it, removing obstacles, digging new passages and pushing the vehicle around tight corners. Not one hour into the journey, the engine fell silent. While I seated myself in the library to figure out how to get it running again, the hired hands had to start pulling and pushing the vehicle through the dark underworld by hand.

Cave exploration of this kind is not difficult. The trick is to find a crack in the rock wide enough to pass a fifteen-yard-wide vehicle through, and then continue until you reach the desired destination. For particularly difficult situations we also had a large drill that was attached to the front of our vessel, but we rarely had to use it. Whenever we thought we had reached a dead-end, some sort of crevice or half-hidden passageway seemed to appear for the hired hands to apply themselves to, and the expedition could safely move forth. Now, "safely" is maybe not the term. There was nothing safe about this expedition. We all knew there was a strong likelihood that one or more of the hired hands would possibly not make it home again, as they were constantly putting themselves in seemingly unnecessary danger in their efforts to clear the way for the professor's vessel and strain to push the thing onwards in this less-than-hospitable environment.

Life onboard was uneventful, but we were not short on useful diversions. We had an assortment of games onboard, including a pool table and a small badminton court. All of us had stocked up on reading materials, and the food was acceptable. The professor had brought a large assortment of tinned dishes that made a passable meal on most days.

I soon gave up on my attempts to get the engine going. The vessel made decent headway using the manual input of our workers, so really there was no need.

Morale among the workers started to wane after about a week. Rations were maybe not calculated for the muscle-bound savage type, but rather the more sedate gentlemen who navigated the craft. At this stage, of course, navigating the craft mostly entailed giving orders to the hired hands on how to proceed in their digging of the tunnel and pulling of the craft. Some of the workers began to make demands.

Again, days passed, and every day a festering enmity among the hired hands became increasingly evident. In an effort to appease them, we offered scraps from our latest meal, but the ensuing replenishment of their spirits only increased their avarice, and soon they were eying our casks of fine liquor. This is where the professor stepped in to save our skins.

He walked onto the landing, cast a disapproving look on the congregated lowlife, and volunteered the speech of a lifetime, which completely dumbfounded the ogling wretches below, and before long, work was resumed. Regretfully, I cannot to this day fix in my mind a single passage from the speech he made.

Then one morning, without previous warning, we woke up to find that the vessel had come to a halt. The manual labourers were nowhere to be seen, and consequently we found ourselves stranded in a nightmarish subterranean cul-de-sac. For the first time, some of us ventured outside of the craft in an effort to evaluate the situation. We entered a promising side-tunnel and started to walk in the direction of some strange, muffled sounds emanating from within the mountain.

Minutes passed, maybe hours, and suddenly the sounds became clear as day. It was speech! Not human speech, or that of any civilised language, but speech nevertheless. And the place was lit by a hidden light source, creating a ghostly effect as shadows of these hideous - but nonetheless clearly sentient - creatures moved across the ceiling of a large cave. A sudden slip of the boot from one of us (Mr Norris?) alerted the creatures to our presence, and soon we were brought forth to be introduced to their leader.

The congregated savages fell into silent awe as we strode towards the throne-like amalgamation of goods in the centre of the cave, upon which a strangely bewitching female sat, holding in her hands what seemed to be some kind of liturgical text.

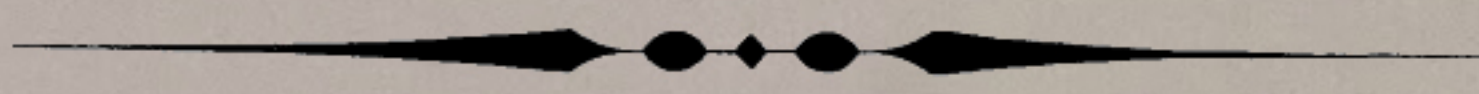
And she began to read out aloud the contents, in a voice both mellifluous and plain at the same time. The words made no sense in her garbled phrasing, but was clearly English, the common language of King and simple peasant alike. Her pronunciation veered more to the latter, and after a minute or two our ears seemed to have assimilated this foreign language and it all began to make a bit of sense. The paper was apparently the contract of employment drawn up by the professor to bind the hired hands to the project. As read out by this fair creature, the terms seemed to us rather less justifiable than they had appeared on the surface, and slowly our attitude to our escaped brethren shifted slightly. As our minds and perspectives changed towards the hired hands, so did the appearance of the creatures surrounding us in the cave. They became more human-like, more like us. As did their speech, which more and more started to resemble the idiom of the working masses. Some of their faces seemed almost familiar.

That was the moment that some of us realised that the queen in front of us was no more than a simple lawyer, engaged by the miners' union to safeguard the rights of our hired hands. The professor humbly obliged to the new terms after a short negotiation, and soon the expedition could resume. But this time the course was set for the surface!

The passage home was less eventful, and since the tunnel previously dug by the workers could once again be utilised, they could focus on pulling the tunnelling vessel rather than digging. Some of the professors' less appealing tins were shared among the labourers, and for a time some sort of familial bond was established between us and them. In our benevolence, we let them idle for a few minutes before we had to set off for the last stretch.

On reaching the opening of the tunnel through which we entered the subterranean dreamland where we had spent the last six months (approximately), the workers immediately sprinted off, grasping their wage packets. We were forced to make the last fifty yards or so by foot, and understandably exhausted were greeted by the welcoming committee slightly more the worse for wear than anticipated.

But on the whole it had been a great triumph. We had reached farther down than any humans before us. Exactly how far was impossible to ascertain as all scientific instruments stopped working after some time. Some, or all, perhaps never fully functioning in the first place. Nevertheless, we came out of it alive, and all of us had gathered stories to last a lifetime. This was my story.



THE END.

Dedicated to the memory of
Professor Digbert Brown,
whereabouts unknown