

An Escape From The Tunnel

BY ANDREW GIBSON

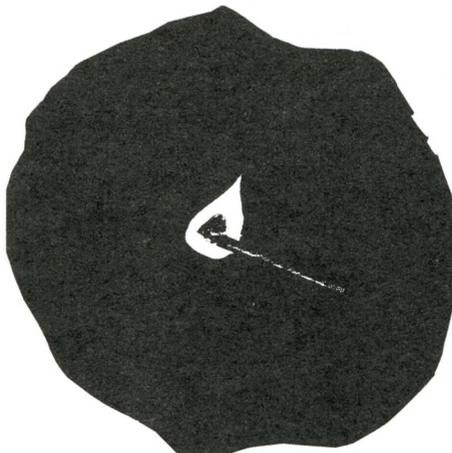
When the last installment of this epic ended, the two surveyors, laden like beasts of burden, and the two geologists, carrying their hammers and pocket microscopes, were toiling up the mountain, puffing like grampi. The low scudding clouds — cumulo nimbus, as I noted at the time, after consulting my Universal Cloud Chart — were all discharging their moisture immediately overhead, to the extent that we had to stop periodically to undress and wring out our clothing. One can't be too careful about pneumonia, you know. You may now read on.

As we climbed, sometimes with the aid of ropes, there were periods when the rain stopped, and the sun came out. But we learned to dread such intervals, because we were immediately attacked by the dreaded Alpine mosquitoes. In case you haven't heard of them, these are a special mutation, equipped with very big lungs, the better to breathe the rarified mountain air. (For the same reason, they are often forced to fly in tandem, like bi-planes.) Their usual quarry is the mountain goat, an animal impervious to almost everything, and therefore the Alpine mosquito's bite is very toxic to humans. But we took the precaution of smearing ourselves liberally with Brut, which although allegedly irresistible to ladies, is offensive to the much more delicate female mosquito. So we were not molested, except by horse flies and deer flies.

But when we reached the far side of the mountain, and began making our way along it to the tunnel, our difficulty was not with insects, but with something far more lethal. The slope we had to cross was made of broken rock, so steep as to be just on the point of sliding down into the river, 2000 feet below. The geologists ran across at top speed, leaving an accelerating trail of boulders bouncing behind them, but we were loaded down, and even though our feet were given thrust by stark terror, we couldn't go very fast. So we chose our route carefully, read again the Surveyor's Creed, with the beautiful concluding words, "In any case, dost thou wish to live forever?", and made our best speed across — successfully, it may be presumed, unless this is being written by supernatural means.

We reached the tunnel shortly afterwards. The entrance, built of logs decades before, had partially collapsed, and the overburden blocked the mouth, making

a dam over which a stream was flowing. The tunnel sloped up slightly from the entrance, but there was still 6 feet of icy water to get through. Not only that, but the entrance showed every sign of collapsing, in which case the tunnel might fill up completely, with disastrous consequences for any surveyors inside unequipped with gills. Now we knew why the other party had left. When they came, the water was over their heads, and the mining company, reluctant to spend any money at the wrong end of the tunnel had, in effect, suggested that they swim. But their disappearance had caused the company to cough up enough dollars to partially unblock the entrance, and it seemed probable that the water would get lower yet.



VIEW OF THE TUNNEL

What to do? We consulted the Surveyor's Creed again, seeking guidance, and decided that our duty was clear. We would come back tomorrow, with hip waders and miner's lamps, and do our work as quickly as possible, hoping that the audibly creaking logs at the entrance would hold up for just a few hours more. The remainder of this day, should we get back over the slide successfully, would be spent in prayer, meditation, and frequent consultation of the Creed, particularly the inspirational "Lo, it is written that whosoever doubles not an angle, or verifies not a hanging line, will be cast into the fiery furnace, but the righteous shall escape. yea, even from the bowels of tunnels".

The next morning, in the still incessant rain, we again made our way up the mountain, and safely across the slide — a trip which was made mem-

orable because of a most peculiar occurrence. Half way across, we actually saw two squirrels, hurtling down the mountain on a flat stone, for all the world like children on a toboggan. They were obviously having fun, and this sight made me change my former requisition to be a loon in my next incarnation. A loon has no enemy, but that laugh is really deafening. I now wish to be an Alpine squirrel.

Cheered by this sight, we arrived at the tunnel. Sure enough, the water had gone down enough to allow us to use waders going up to our chests, and so, with our equipment held over our heads, and following the beams of the miner's lamps, we plunged into the icy water, and threaded our way through the helter-skelter beams, measuring as we went.

The water got shallower, and the tunnel darker, and finally the light faded, and we were entombed in a place last occupied sixty years before. It was eerie. The tunnel was solid rock now, and the only sound, other than the staccato of our knees, was the dripping of water from overhead, and the gurgling of the stream around our ankles. Some of the rocks were fluorescent, and made weird shapes in the darkness, after the light was out. Leaning up against the wall were the shovels and picks on which the miners had been leaning that sad day, so many decades ago, when the electrifying news came that their pay cheques had bounced. They crumbled under our touch. We also found some boulders set out in a rough circle, with a larger one in the centre, on which could still be seen the remains of a deck of cards — mute evidence of the mental turmoil of the miners, who too upset to work, had tried to find solace in games of chance.

The foreman had told us something of the history of the mine. The mountain, you see, was named after the boss of the original tunnel gang, in recognition of the heroic way in which he had met his death. One of the tunnel entrances, started but abandoned, was over an almost vertical wall of the canyon, and one day he was standing at the entrance, exhorting the gang in his gentle voice to get the lead out or be fired. He inadvertently stepped backwards, and fell — and the legend was handed down that his last words, echoing back up from the depths, were "Get back to work, you ?!&*!?" The mining company was much touched by his dedication, and saw to it that his name was perpetuated.

The next episode will be the concluding one. I can't stand the suspense.