JULES VERNE

THE UNDERGROUND CITY; OR, THE BLACK INDIES (SOMETIMES CALLED THE CHILD OF THE CAVERN)

Jules Verne

The Underground City; Or, The Black Indies (Sometimes Called The Child of the Cavern)

EAN 8596547357995

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

THE UNDERGROUND CITY

CHAPTER I. CONTRADICTORY LETTERS

Table of Contents

To Mr. F. R. Starr, Engineer, 30 Canongate, Edinburgh.

IF Mr. James Starr will come to-morrow to the Aberfoyle coal-mines, Dochart pit, Yarrow shaft, a communication of an interesting nature will be made to him.

“Mr. James Starr will be awaited for, the whole day, at the Callander station, by Harry Ford, son of the old overman Simon Ford.”

“He is requested to keep this invitation secret.”

Such was the letter which James Starr received by the first post, on the 3rd December, 18—, the letter bearing the Aberfoyle postmark, county of Stirling, Scotland.

The engineer’s curiosity was excited to the highest pitch. It never occurred to him to doubt whether this letter might not be a hoax. For many years he had known Simon Ford, one of the former foremen of the Aberfoyle mines, of which he, James Starr, had for twenty years, been the manager, or, as he would be termed in English coal-mines, the viewer. James Starr was a strongly-constituted man, on whom his fifty-five years weighed no more heavily than if they had been forty. He belonged to an old Edinburgh family, and was one of its most distinguished members. His labors did credit to the body of engineers who are gradually devouring the carboniferous subsoil of the United Kingdom, as much at Cardiff and Newcastle, as in the southern counties of Scotland. However, it was more particularly in the depths of the mysterious mines of Aberfoyle, which border on the Alloa mines and occupy part of the county of Stirling, that

the name of Starr had acquired the greatest renown. There, the greater part of his existence had been passed. Besides this, James Starr belonged to the Scottish Antiquarian Society, of which he had been made president. He was also included amongst the most active members of the Royal Institution; and the Edinburgh Review frequently published clever articles signed by him. He was in fact one of those practical men to whom is due the prosperity of England. He held a high rank in the old capital of Scotland, which not only from a physical but also from a moral point of view, well deserves the name of the Northern Athens.

We know that the English have given to their vast extent of coal-mines a very significant name. They very justly call them the “Black Indies,” and these Indies have contributed perhaps even more than the Eastern Indies to swell the surprising wealth of the United Kingdom.

At this period, the limit of time assigned by professional men for the exhaustion of coal-mines was far distant and there was no dread of scarcity. There were still extensive mines to be worked in the two Americas. The manufactories, appropriated to so many different uses, locomotives, steamers, gas works, &c., were not likely to fail for want of the mineral fuel; but the consumption had so increased during the last few years, that certain beds had been exhausted even to their smallest veins. Now deserted, these mines perforated the ground with their useless shafts and forsaken galleries. This was exactly the case with the pits of Aberfoyle.

Ten years before, the last butty had raised the last ton of coal from this colliery. The underground working stock,

traction engines, trucks which run on rails along the galleries, subterranean tramways, frames to support the shaft, pipes—in short, all that constituted the machinery of a mine had been brought up from its depths. The exhausted mine was like the body of a huge fantastically-shaped mastodon, from which all the organs of life have been taken, and only the skeleton remains.

Nothing was left but long wooden ladders, down the Yarrow shaft—the only one which now gave access to the lower galleries of the Dochart pit. Above ground, the sheds, formerly sheltering the outside works, still marked the spot where the shaft of that pit had been sunk, it being now abandoned, as were the other pits, of which the whole constituted the mines of Aberfoyle.

It was a sad day, when for the last time the workmen quitted the mine, in which they had lived for so many years. The engineer, James Starr, had collected the hundreds of workmen which composed the active and courageous population of the mine. Overmen, brakemen, putters, wastemen, barrowmen, masons, smiths, carpenters, outside and inside laborers, women, children, and old men, all were collected in the great yard of the Dochart pit, formerly heaped with coal from the mine.

Many of these families had existed for generations in the mine of old Aberfoyle; they were now driven to seek the means of subsistence elsewhere, and they waited sadly to bid farewell to the engineer.

James Starr stood upright, at the door of the vast shed in which he had for so many years superintended the powerful machines of the shaft. Simon Ford, the foreman of the

Dochart pit, then fifty-five years of age, and other managers and overseers, surrounded him. James Starr took off his hat. The miners, cap in hand, kept a profound silence. This farewell scene was of a touching character, not wanting in grandeur.

“My friends,” said the engineer, “the time has come for us to separate. The Aberfoyle mines, which for so many years have united us in a common work, are now exhausted. All our researches have not led to the discovery of a new vein, and the last block of coal has just been extracted from the Dochart pit.” And in confirmation of his words, James Starr pointed to a lump of coal which had been kept at the bottom of a basket.

“This piece of coal, my friends,” resumed James Starr, “is like the last drop of blood which has flowed through the veins of the mine! We shall keep it, as the first fragment of coal is kept, which was extracted a hundred and fifty years ago from the bearings of Aberfoyle. Between these two pieces, how many generations of workmen have succeeded each other in our pits! Now, it is over! The last words which your engineer will address to you are a farewell. You have lived in this mine, which your hands have emptied. The work has been hard, but not without profit for you. Our great family must disperse, and it is not probable that the future will ever again unite the scattered members. But do not forget that we have lived together for a long time, and that it will be the duty of the miners of Aberfoyle to help each other. Your old masters will not forget you either. When men have worked together, they must never be stranger to each other again. We shall keep our eye on you, and wherever

you go, our recommendations shall follow you. Farewell then, my friends, and may Heaven be with you!”

So saying, James Starr wrung the horny hand of the oldest miner, whose eyes were dim with tears. Then the overmen of the different pits came forward to shake hands with him, whilst the miners waved their caps, shouting, “Farewell, James Starr, our master and our friend!”

This farewell would leave a lasting remembrance in all these honest hearts. Slowly and sadly the population quitted the yard. The black soil of the roads leading to the Dochart pit resounded for the last time to the tread of miners’ feet, and silence succeeded to the bustling life which had till then filled the Aberfoyle mines.

One man alone remained by James Starr. This was the overman, Simon Ford. Near him stood a boy, about fifteen years of age, who for some years already had been employed down below.

James Starr and Simon Ford knew and esteemed each other well. “Good-by, Simon,” said the engineer.

“Good-by, Mr. Starr,” replied the overman, “let me add, till we meet again!”

“Yes, till we meet again. Ford!” answered James Starr. “You know that I shall be always glad to see you, and talk over old times.”

“I know that, Mr. Starr.”

“My house in Edinburgh is always open to you.”

“It’s a long way off, is Edinburgh!” answered the man shaking his head. “Ay, a long way from the Dochart pit.”

“A long way, Simon? Where do you mean to live?”

“Even here, Mr. Starr! We’re not going to leave the mine, our good old nurse, just because her milk is dried up! My wife, my boy, and myself, we mean to remain faithful to her!”

“Good-by then, Simon,” replied the engineer, whose voice, in spite of himself, betrayed some emotion.

“No, I tell you, it’s TILL WE MEET AGAIN, Mr. Starr, and not Just ‘good-by,’” returned the foreman. “Mark my words, Aberfoyle will see you again!”

The engineer did not try to dispel the man’s illusion. He patted Harry’s head, again wrung the father’s hand, and left the mine.

All this had taken place ten years ago; but, notwithstanding the wish which the overman had expressed to see him again, during that time Starr had heard nothing of him. It was after ten years of separation that he got this letter from Simon Ford, requesting him to take without delay the road to the old Aberfoyle colliery.

A communication of an interesting nature, what could it be? Dochart pit. Yarrow shaft! What recollections of the past these names brought back to him! Yes, that was a fine time, that of work, of struggle,—the best part of the engineer’s life. Starr re-read his letter. He pondered over it in all its bearings. He much regretted that just a line more had not been added by Ford. He wished he had not been quite so laconic.

Was it possible that the old foreman had discovered some new vein? No! Starr remembered with what minute care the mines had been explored before the definite cessation of the works. He had himself proceeded to the

lowest soundings without finding the least trace in the soil, burrowed in every direction. They had even attempted to find coal under strata which are usually below it, such as the Devonian red sandstone, but without result. James Starr had therefore abandoned the mine with the absolute conviction that it did not contain another bit of coal.

“No,” he repeated, “no! How is it possible that anything which could have escaped my researches, should be revealed to those of Simon Ford. However, the old overman must well know that such a discovery would be the one thing in the world to interest me, and this invitation, which I must keep secret, to repair to the Dochart pit!” James Starr always came back to that.

On the other hand, the engineer knew Ford to be a clever miner, peculiarly endowed with the instinct of his trade. He had not seen him since the time when the Aberfoyle colliery was abandoned, and did not know either what he was doing or where he was living, with his wife and his son. All that he now knew was, that a rendezvous had been appointed him at the Yarrow shaft, and that Harry, Simon Ford’s son, was to wait for him during the whole of the next day at the Callander station.

“I shall go, I shall go!” said Starr, his excitement increasing as the time drew near.

Our worthy engineer belonged to that class of men whose brain is always on the boil, like a kettle on a hot fire. In some of these brain kettles the ideas bubble over, in others they just simmer quietly. Now on this day, James Starr’s ideas were boiling fast.

But suddenly an unexpected incident occurred. This was the drop of cold water, which in a moment was to condense all the vapors of the brain. About six in the evening, by the third post, Starr’s servant brought him a second letter. This letter was enclosed in a coarse envelope, and evidently directed by a hand unaccustomed to the use of a pen. James Starr tore it open. It contained only a scrap of paper, yellowed by time, and apparently torn out of an old copy book.

On this paper was written a single sentence, thus worded:

“It is useless for the engineer James Starr to trouble himself, Simon Ford’s letter being now without object.”

No signature.

CHAPTER II. ON THE ROAD

Table of Contents

THE course of James Starr’s ideas was abruptly stopped, when he got this second letter contradicting the first.

“What does this mean?” said he to himself. He took up the torn envelope, and examined it. Like the other, it bore the Aberfoyle postmark. It had therefore come from the same part of the county of Stirling. The old miner had evidently not written it. But, no less evidently, the author of this second letter knew the overman’s secret, since it expressly contradicted the invitation to the engineer to go to the Yarrow shaft.

Was it really true that the first communication was now without object? Did someone wish to prevent James Starr from troubling himself either uselessly or otherwise? Might there not be rather a malevolent intention to thwart Ford’s plans?

This was the conclusion at which James Starr arrived, after mature reflection. The contradiction which existed between the two letters only wrought in him a more keen desire to visit the Dochart pit. And besides, if after all it was a hoax, it was well worth while to prove it. Starr also thought it wiser to give more credence to the first letter than to the second; that is to say, to the request of such a man as Simon Ford, rather than to the warning of his anonymous contradictor.

“Indeed,” said he, “the fact of anyone endeavoring to influence my resolution, shows that Ford’s communication

must be of great importance. To-morrow, at the appointed time, I shall be at the rendezvous.”

In the evening, Starr made his preparations for departure. As it might happen that his absence would be prolonged for some days, he wrote to Sir W. Elphiston, President of the Royal Institution, that he should be unable to be present at the next meeting of the Society. He also wrote to excuse himself from two or three engagements which he had made for the week. Then, having ordered his servant to pack a traveling bag, he went to bed, more excited than the affair perhaps warranted.

The next day, at five o’clock, James Starr jumped out of bed, dressed himself warmly, for a cold rain was falling, and left his house in the Canongate, to go to Granton Pier to catch the steamer, which in three hours would take him up the Forth as far as Stirling.

For the first time in his life, perhaps, in passing along the Canongate, he did NOT TURN TO LOOK AT HOLYROOD, the palace of the former sovereigns of Scotland. He did not notice the sentinels who stood before its gateways, dressed in the uniform of their Highland regiment, tartan kilt, plaid and sporran complete. His whole thought was to reach Callander where Harry Ford was supposedly awaiting him.

The better to understand this narrative, it will be as well to hear a few words on the origin of coal. During the geological epoch, when the terrestrial spheroid was still in course of formation, a thick atmosphere surrounded it, saturated with watery vapors, and copiously impregnated with carbonic acid. The vapors gradually condensed in diluvial rains, which fell as if they had leapt from the necks

of thousands of millions of seltzer water bottles. This liquid, loaded with carbonic acid, rushed in torrents over a deep soft soil, subject to sudden or slow alterations of form, and maintained in its semi-fluid state as much by the heat of the sun as by the fires of the interior mass. The internal heat had not as yet been collected in the center of the globe. The terrestrial crust, thin and incompletely hardened, allowed it to spread through its pores. This caused a peculiar form of vegetation, such as is probably produced on the surface of the inferior planets, Venus or Mercury, which revolve nearer than our earth around the radiant sun of our system.

The soil of the continents was covered with immense forests. Carbonic acid, so suitable for the development of the vegetable kingdom, abounded. The feet of these trees were drowned in a sort of immense lagoon, kept continually full by currents of fresh and salt waters. They eagerly assimilated to themselves the carbon which they, little by little, extracted from the atmosphere, as yet unfit for the function of life, and it may be said that they were destined to store it, in the form of coal, in the very bowels of the earth.

It was the earthquake period, caused by internal convulsions, which suddenly modified the unsettled features of the terrestrial surface. Here, an intumescence which was to become a mountain, there, an abyss which was to be filled with an ocean or a sea. There, whole forests sunk through the earth’s crust, below the unfixed strata, either until they found a resting-place, such as the primitive bed of granitic rock, or, settling together in a heap, they formed a solid mass.

As the waters were contained in no bed, and were spread over every part of the globe, they rushed where they liked, tearing from the scarcely-formed rocks material with which to compose schists, sandstones, and limestones. This the roving waves bore over the submerged and now peaty forests, and deposited above them the elements of rocks which were to superpose the coal strata. In course of time, periods of which include millions of years, these earths hardened in layers, and enclosed under a thick carapace of pudding-stone, schist, compact or friable sandstone, gravel and stones, the whole of the massive forests.

And what went on in this gigantic crucible, where all this vegetable matter had accumulated, sunk to various depths? A regular chemical operation, a sort of distillation. All the carbon contained in these vegetables had agglomerated, and little by little coal was forming under the double influence of enormous pressure and the high temperature maintained by the internal fires, at this time so close to it.

Thus there was one kingdom substituted for another in this slow but irresistible reaction. The vegetable was transformed into a mineral. Plants which had lived the vegetative life in all the vigor of first creation became petrified. Some of the substances enclosed in this vast herbal left their impression on the other more rapidly mineralized products, which pressed them as an hydraulic press of incalculable power would have done.

Thus also shells, zoophytes, star-fish, polypi, spirifores, even fish and lizards brought by the water, left on the yet soft coal their exact likeness, “admirably taken off.”

Pressure seems to have played a considerable part in the formation of carboniferous strata. In fact, it is to its degree of power that are due the different sorts of coal, of which industry makes use. Thus in the lowest layers of the coal ground appears the anthracite, which, being almost destitute of volatile matter, contains the greatest quantity of carbon. In the higher beds are found, on the contrary, lignite and fossil wood, substances in which the quantity of carbon is infinitely less. Between these two beds, according to the degree of pressure to which they have been subjected, are found veins of graphite and rich or poor coal. It may be asserted that it is for want of sufficient pressure that beds of peaty bog have not been completely changed into coal. So then, the origin of coal mines, in whatever part of the globe they have been discovered, is this: the absorption through the terrestrial crust of the great forests of the geological period; then, the mineralization of the vegetables obtained in the course of time, under the influence of pressure and heat, and under the action of carbonic acid.

Now, at the time when the events related in this story took place, some of the most important mines of the Scottish coal beds had been exhausted by too rapid working. In the region which extends between Edinburgh and Glasgow, for a distance of ten or twelve miles, lay the Aberfoyle colliery, of which the engineer, James Starr, had so long directed the works. For ten years these mines had been abandoned. No new seams had been discovered, although the soundings had been carried to a depth of fifteen hundred or even of two thousand feet, and when