

A Cat Can Look At A King or, A Woman Can Look At A Gold Mine

"Down to the 700-foot level." To me, a guest of the hospitable staff of Antanok mine, Benguet Consolidated, that phrase meant nothing the evening before.

Morning comes early in the Baguio hills. At 5:15 my alarm clock sneered at me; but, by heroic effort, I was able to join my gracious hosts at 5:30 breakfast. Wisely they made it a man-size meal, for I was to go down into the earth. And they have had experience, recommend the precaution of intestinal fortitude.

So at 6:00 I stood by the cage. Sheltered there at the mine building was this sturdy elevator. The khaki-clad operator, in charge of the levers some distance away, looked entirely nonchalant about sending folk into the depths.

Work comes first at a gold mine. A large crew had lined up. Methodically they were checked in. Then, in one small group after another, they disappeared into the cage. The outgoing shift was brought up alternately, looking tired and muddy.

"You'll have to wear miner's clothes, young woman," the Superintendent said smilingly.

When I emerged from the dressing room, I wore the regulation garb of the hard-rock miner. The effect was decidedly not Rue de la Paix. On my head there was a safety hat of metal, looking like nothing else but a big upside-down coconut shell. On my feet were high rubber boots, skidding me hither and you in a most unexpected fashion at odd times. Sweatshirt, trousers and rainjacket made up the ensemble.

Entering the cage was a moment for bravado. The doors closed irrevocably. I grasped the overhead bar as instructed by my mining companion, and we went down into the dark. Women are notoriously lacking in judgment of distance; but I now lay claim to a thorough knowledge of the length of 100 feet. That dark distance between the lighted tunnels at each of these levels is just too, too long.

Cautiously I stepped out at the 700-foot level. My guide lighted a carbide lamp for me expertly. Then he warned me not to swing it against the trousers I was wearing—for they belonged to him.

"Do you really want to go to the face of a tunnel?" he inquired solicitously.

Not for nothing have I been reading cigarette ads for a lifetime. Puffing the proper brand of tobacco, I answered with convincing nonchalance, "Why not?"

Overhead and underfoot, and on both sides, was the gray rock of centuries. Adown the fingers of tunnels, car rails ran. Here and there, workers were pushing the ore-filled carriers.

The same cage that brought me down would carry back to the surface, who knows how many tons of gold-bearing rock!

My first surprise was the temperature of these caverns. The warmth was stifling. And underfoot, rivulets of water seeping from the good earth swished around my rubber boots as I walked.

Gingerly holding my carbide lamp, which gave excellent light, I trudged after my guide. After walking under a heavily timbered portion of tunnel, I asked "What's that?" So I heard of the square-set. Even feminine I was able to grasp its implications. The earth here was heavy. On the return trip, I instinctively quickened my step at that place. A few timbers holding up 700 feet of rock (and that measurement only from the shaft's portal, with another thousand feet of mountain rising above) were to me an unpleasant *momenta mori*.

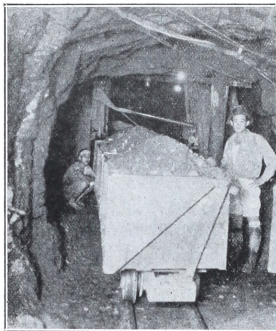
But before making the scurrying journey back to daylight, I saw what I had come to see: ore in place. Along the tunnel sides, at various intervals where samples had been taken, placards showed the assay values. At the end, or face, of this tunnel, the carbide lamp cast its flaring glow on quartz-streaked rock, the white filigree of that hardest of substances making a dainty tracery in the jutting grey.

Back in the sun again, I saw thankfully—as if they were home to me—the assemblage of machines and offices and carpenter shops. Now, even the Bontoc chieftain who is one of the keepers of the peace, seemed a friend. He and his war axe were at least on the surface of the earth; and the sky has no need of square-sets.

"What do you think of the mine?" asked the Superintendent, his eyes twinkling.

"Tops!" I answered.

—Betty Simpson.



A typical scene underground of the gold-mining industry's go-carts

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