

GARIAN

by C. M. Anderson

'Wonderland's' underground house

LEWIS Carrol drew the world's attention to what the people of Garian have known for a long time: Life can be more interesting underneath the ground than on top of it.

Why did he send Alice to meet her adventures a long way down at the bottom of a hole?

A long dark climb up a hollow tree to some aerial wonderland might have done as well.

But no. Up there spied on by the humdrum world below? He wanted for Alice's adventures a world sealed off, in wondrous uniqueness, as though no other existed outside it.

Below ground, he found it—just as have the Garians, in their shaft-dwellings deep in the earth.

It wasn't a white rabbit I followed to the mouth of a hole, but a cream-coloured Fiat belonging to the gentleman who was taking me on a visit to his family home.

Although married, now, with a family of his own, and living in Tripoli, he carries so sentimental an attachment to this unique form of life that never a week goes by that he doesn't spend a day of it here, down-under. (Other people of Garian cling to it as tenaciously; according to him, at least 50 per cent of the population lives thus, below ground.)

Nothing was visible where we parked our cars but a circular mound of thrown-up earth about eight feet high.

To look down into the living quarters one would have to climb this pile of rubble; and standing on it were two white, twist-tail Libyan shepherd dogs, jaws snapping in furious frustration at the restraint my status as guest was imposing on

them. Probably few Peeping Toms.

Set into the earthen mound was a wide rough wooden door. My escort opened it into a tunnel black as a rabbit hole. He stepped inside, and...

down went Alice after...

The tunnel was about an arm's span wide, and curved gently to the right, declining steeply, really a ramp with only an occasional shallow step cut into the packed earthen floor, which, being unpredictable, was more hazard than help. Solicitously, he took my arm.

The air was fresh, and smelled faintly of animals; as we descended it grew noticeably cooler. A strong upward draft blew steadily in our faces, as though we were drifting slowly down, through space.

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end?

I felt a hand on my elbow guiding me to the right. Here the slow curve quickened to a sharp bend, and a diffused glow was thrown against the wall. Then, around the turn the tunnel filled with a soft light that, a few steps on, brightened into a blinding square of sunlight.

...suddenly, thump! thump!... and the fall was over.

We stepped out into the bottom of a shaft about 40 feet deep, or about the height of a three-storey building, standing in a circular beaten earth courtyard, about 40 feet in diameter.

All around it opened doorless rooms, some with a curtain drawn across. Cut into the wall of the shaft at about the second storey level reached by a ladder, was a fairly good-sized opening that ended in black, too deep for the light to

penetrate.

«A storeroom,» said my friend. «In my house in Tripoli, I have not many closets. Here, when they want another closet—well,» he shrugged, «they just dig one.»

«And I suppose the same with a spare room,» I said wistfully.

He nodded.

«They can dig out anything but a garage.»

Most of these dwellings are wired for electricity—on the surface, a short pole, and a line disappearing into the earth is often the only evidence of their existence.

Only Women

In the centre of the courtyard is a well that, when it was dug over 300 years ago, collected run-off water from an imperceptible pitch in the courtyard floor. Now it is boarded up, the water no longer acceptable to a more sanitary-minded generation. Water is brought down from the surface, drawn from a Government-built nearby well.

The open courtyard centred by a well, the numerous rooms ringed round it is a typical Arabic-style house. There are many like it in both the cities of Libya and the desert. The difference only is in level; this one is sunk into the ground instead of stacked on top of it.

For this reason, the word troglodytes commonly used to describe the people who live in them doesn't seem quite accurate. Its Greek root means (according to Webster's) «one who creeps into holes». Troglodyte is cave-dweller, with implications of primitivism, etc.

There used to be a large community of people living like a bank of swallows in holes dug into cliff-faces along the road running west from Granada, Spain, who were, I should guess, true «troglodytes», and whose primitive living conditions certainly bear no resemblance to the shaft-houses of Garian. My friend, who was born and raised in one, never uses the word troglodyte.

The only people home late in the morning were the women and children, and as soon as we'd descended we were hurried into the family-room for tea.

There were mats on the floor, with a bright scattering of rugs. Fresh cotton slips covered the cushions, and the walls, in the bright light pouring in from the courtyard, danced with hundreds of hanging, vividly painted enamel bowls. A curtain was drawn across the end of the room, partially hiding a bed; beside it was a cradle and a sleeping baby.

We were greeted with brief reserve that quickly melted into noisy enthusiasm—hand-shaking, knuckle-kissing, giggling and starings, and a barrage of marvelously pointed questions passed to me through my friend.

Seated on the mat, waiting for tea, a little girl with large searching

brown eyes handed me a bowl of almonds; I took one and passed the bowl to an old lady on my right. A matriarch, sunken, seamed, heavily henna-ed and tattooed, wisps of red hair slipping down from a gaudy rakishly-wrapped turban, she had the authoritarian voice, and roguish eye of a woman who has lived long enough to have changed everybody's diaper. She immediately set on my friend, scolding and fussing, prodding the grey flannel suit with sharp, persistent fingers, jab, jab, like the Duchess' chin.

The bowl of almonds was held out to me, again, this time by a new little girl who wanted her turn for a close-up look; I took one, and offered the bowl to the matriarch.

The baby woke and cried, and one of the little girls flew, and picked it up, and held it to gaze at the company in unfocussed wonder. On its breast was pinned a tiny gold Hand of Fatima.

A rooster strolled past the door, dragging its claws and pecking, dreamily.

Up above, on the surface, both dogs began to bark, but the sound seemed to come from miles away.

No Teeth

Tea was being made by a young girl who had, I was told, just recently married my friend's cousin. She was in a post-adolescent phase of furious modesty bolstered by tradition, and was at such elaborate pains to keep her face hidden from my friend—tugging at the baracan, ducking her chin, hunching a shoulder, and so on and on (she could easily have turned her back!)—that our tea seemed to be drawing father, and farther into the future.

At last one of the younger women, very likely her mother-in-law, snapped, «Bilaaah!!» and gave her wrist a slap, adding something I translated to my own satisfaction, as... «You make me sick!» She took over the tea-making, leaving the poor girl with nothing to do but keep herself covered, and unobtrusive—the last thing on earth she wanted.

When a little girl again handed me the almond bowl, and I, in turn, offered it to the old lady, she—probably made cross by waiting for her tea—snapped at me!

«She says,» said my friend, looking pained, «Will you please stop passing her the almonds? She hasn't got any teeth.»

The advantages of a shaft-house to the people who first built them, centuries ago, must have been very real. They are easy to defend, the tunnel too narrow for attack, the courtyard too deep to jump into; animals are safe overnight, driven into the tunnel like a long stockade; the bitter wind from the Jebel in winter can't reach them nor, in summer, the hot sun, except when directly overhead; they're wonderfully quiet, nobody hears his next door neighbor. And, of course, a house like this is, infinitely expand-

able—until your shovel bites through and scoops up a neighbour in his Turkish-style Chic Sale.

These days, of course, the advantages are fewer; it is chiefly sentiment that must keep that 50 per cent bound to a way of life ancient, and so strange. But sentiment can be strong.

«Shall you be driving back to Tripoli?» I asked my friend, as we stood outside the wooden door in the sun at the end of the slow spiral in darkness.

He shook his head, «No. I always stay until night. You see,» and he gave a shy smile, «I only have the one day a week I can be here.»

Driving away, I once glanced back. It had all gone; nothing was there but parched and broken earth. I couldn't even tell which scrappy heap of rubble hid the hole I'd gone down. And the sassy old lady... the bashful bride... the big-eyed little girl with the almond bowl. The tea party! All had vanished, as if swallowed by the earth.

«Oh, I've had such a curious dream!» said Alice.