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When the World Screamed

A Professor Challenger Adventure

by
Arthur Conan Doyle
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I had a vague recollection of having heard my friend Edward Malone, of the Gazette, speak of Professor Challenger, with whom he had been associated in some remarkable adventures. I am so busy, however, with my own profession, and my firm has been so overtaxed with orders, that I know little of what is going on in the world outside my own special interests. My general recollection was that Challenger has been depicted as a wild genius of a violent and intolerant disposition. I was greatly surprised to receive a business communication from him which was in the following terms:

“14 (Bis),
Enmore Gardens,
Kensington.

“Sir,--

“I have occasion to engage the services of an expert in Artesian borings. I will not conceal from you that my opinion of experts is not a high one, and that I have usually found that a man who, like myself, has a well-equipped brain can take a sounder and broader view than the man who professes a special knowledge (which, alas, is so often a mere profession), and is therefore limited in his outlook. None the less, I am disposed to give you a trial. Looking down the list of Artesian authorities, a certain oddity--I had almost written absurdity--in your name attracted my attention, and I found upon inquiry that my young friend, Mr. Edward Malone, was actually acquainted with you. I am therefore writing to say that I should be glad to have an interview with you, and that if you satisfy my requirements, and my standard is no mean one, I may be inclined to put a most important matter into your hands. I can say no more at present as the matter is of extreme secrecy, which can only be discussed by word of mouth. I beg, therefore, that you will at once cancel any engagement which you may happen to have, and that you will call upon me at the above address at 10.30 in the morning of next Friday. There is a scraper as well as a mat, and Mrs. Challenger is most particular.

“I remain, Sir, as I began,

“George Edward Challenger.”

I handed this letter to my chief clerk to answer, and he informed the Professor that Mr. Peerless Jones would be glad to keep the appointment as arranged. It was a perfectly civil business note, but it began with the phrase:

“Your letter (undated) has been received.”

This drew a second epistle from the Professor:

“Sir,” he said and his writing looked like a barbed wire fence-- “I observe that you animadvert upon the trifle that my letter was undated. Might I draw your attention to the fact that, as some return for a monstrous taxation, our Government is in the habit of affixing a small circular sign or stamp upon the outside on the envelope which notifies the date of posting? Should this sign be missing or illegible your remedy lies with the proper postal authorities. Meanwhile, I would ask you to confine your observations to matters which concern the business over which I consult you, and to cease to comment upon the form which my own letters may assume.”

It was clear to me that I was dealing with a lunatic, so I thought it well before I went any further in the matter to call upon my friend Malone, whom I had known since the old days when we both played Rugger for Richmond. I found him the same jolly Irishman as ever, and much amused at my first brush with Challenger.

“That’s nothing, my boy,” said he. “You’ll feel as if you had been skinned alive when you have been with him five minutes. He beats the world for offensiveness.”

“But why should the world put up with it?”

“They don’t. If you collected all the libel actions and all the rows and all the police-court assaults--”

“Assaults!”

“Bless you, he would think nothing of throwing you downstairs if you have a disagreement. He is a primitive cave-man in a lounge suit. I can see him with a club in one hand and a jagged bit of flint in the other. Some people are born out of their proper century, but he is born out of his millennium. He belongs to the early neolithic or thereabouts.”

“And he a professor!”

“There is the wonder of it! It’s the greatest brain in Europe, with a driving force behind it that can turn all his dreams into facts.

They do all they can to hold him back for his colleagues hate him like poison, but a lot of trawlers might as well try to hold back the Berengaria. He simply ignores them and steams on his way.”

“Well,” said I, “one thing is clear. I don’t want to have anything to do with him. I’ll cancel that appointment.”

“Not a bit of it. You will keep it to the minute--and mind that it is to the minute or you will hear of it.”

“Why should I?”

“Well, I’ll tell you. First of all, don’t take too seriously what I have said about old Challenger. Everyone who gets close to him learns to love him. There is no real harm in the old bear. Why, I remember how he carried an Indian baby with the smallpox on his back for a hundred miles from the back country down to the Madeira River. He is big every way. He won’t hurt if you get right with him.”

“I won’t give him the chance.”

“You will be a fool if you don’t. Have you ever heard of the Hengist Down Mystery--the shaft-sinking on the South Coast?”

“Some secret coal-mining exploration, I understand.”

Malone winked. “Well, you can put it down as that if you like. You see, I am in the old man’s confidence, and I can’t say anything until he gives the word. But I may tell you this, for it has been in the Press. A man, Betterton, who made his money in rubber, left his whole estate to Challenger some years ago, with the provision that it should be used in the interests of science. It proved to be an enormous sum-- several millions. Challenger then bought a property at Hengist Down, in Sussex. It was worthless land on the north edge of the chalk country, and he got a large tract of it, which he wired off. There was a deep gully in the middle of it. Here he began to make an excavation. He announced”-- here Malone winked again--”that there was petroleum in England and that he meant to prove it. He built a little model village with a colony of well-paid workers who are all sworn to keep their mouths shut. The gully is wired off as well as the estate, and the place is guarded by bloodhounds. Several pressmen have nearly lost their lives, to say nothing of the seats of their trousers, from these creatures. It’s a big operation, and Sir Thomas Morden’s firm has it in hand, but they also are sworn to secrecy. Clearly the time has come when Artesian help is needed. Now, would you not be foolish to refuse such a job as that, with all the interest and experience and a big fat cheque at the end of it--to say nothing of rubbing shoulders with the most wonderful man you have ever met or are ever likely to meet?”

Malone’s arguments prevailed, and Friday morning found me on my way to Enmore Gardens, I took such particular care to be in time that I found myself at the door twenty minutes too soon. I was waiting in the street when it struck me that I recognized the Rolls- Royce with the silver arrow mascot at the door. It was certainly that of Jack Devonshire, the junior partner of the great Morden firm. I had always known him as the most urbane of men, so that it was rather a shock to me when he suddenly appeared, and standing outside the door he raised both his hands, to heaven and said with great fervour: “Damn him! Oh, damn him!”

“What is up, Jack? You seem peeved this morning.”

“Hullo, Peerless! Are you in on this job, too?”

“There seems a chance of it.”

“Well, you find it chastening to the temper.”

“Rather more so than yours can stand, apparently.”

“Well, I should say so. The butler’s message to me was: “The Professor desired me to say, sir, that he was rather busy at present eating an egg, and that if you would call at some more convenient time he would very likely see you.” That was the message delivered by a servant. I may add that I had called to collect forty-two thousand pounds that he owes us.”

I whistled.

“You can’t get your money?”

“Oh, yes, he is all right about money. I’ll do the old gorilla the justice to say that he is open- handed with money. But he pays when he likes and how he likes, and he cares for nobody.

However, you go and try your luck and see how you like it.” With that he flung himself into his motor and was off.

I waited with occasional glances at my watch until the zero hour should arrive. I am, if I may say so, a fairly hefty individual, and a runner-up for the Belsize Boxing Club middle-weights, but I have never faced an interview with such trepidation as this. It was not physical, for I was confident I could hold my own if this inspired lunatic should attack me, but it was a mixture of feelings in which fear of some public scandal and dread of losing a lucrative contract were mingled. However, things are always easier when imagination ceases and action begins. I snapped up my watch and made for the door.

It was opened by an old wooden-faced butler, a man who bore an expression, or an absence of expression, which gave the impression that he was so inured to shocks that nothing on earth would surprise him.

“By appointment, sir?” he asked.

“Certainly.”

He glanced at a list in his hand.

“Your name, sir?... Quite so, Mr. Peerless Jones.... Ten-thirty. Everything is in order. We have to be careful, Mr. Jones, for we are much annoyed by journalists. The Professor, as you may be aware, does not approve of the Press. This way, sir. Professor Challenger is now receiving.”

The next instant I found myself in the presence. I believe that my friend, Ted Malone, has described the man in his “Lost World” yarn better than I can hope to do, so I’ll leave it at that. All I was aware of was a huge trunk of a man behind a mahogany desk, with a great spade-shaped black beard and two large grey eyes half covered with insolent drooping eyelids. His big head sloped back, his beard bristled forward, and his whole appearance conveyed one single impression of arrogant intolerance. “Well, what the devil do you want?” was written all over him. I laid my card on the table.

“Ah yes,” he said, picking it up and handling it as if he disliked the smell of it. “Of course. You are the expert so-called. Mr. Jones-- Mr. Peerless Jones. You may thank your godfather, Mr. Jones, for it was this ludicrous prefix which first drew my attention to you.”

“I am here, Professor Challenger, for a business interview and not to discuss my own name,” said I, with all the dignity I could master.

“Dear me, you seem to be a very touchy person, Mr. Jones. Your nerves are in a highly irritable condition. We must walk warily in dealing with you, Mr. Jones. Pray sit down and compose yourself. I have been reading your little brochure upon the reclaiming of the Sinai Peninsula. Did you write it yourself?”

“Naturally, sir. My name is on it.”

“Quite so! Quite so! But it does not always follow, does it? However, I am prepared to accept your assertion. The book is not without merit of a sort. Beneath the dullness of the diction one gets glimpses of an occasional idea. There are germs of thought here and there. Are you a married man?”

“No, sir. I am not. “

“Then there is some chance of your keeping a secret. “

“If I promised to do so, I would certainly keep my promise. “So you say. My young friend, Malone”--he spoke as if Ted were ten years of age--“has a good opinion of you. He says that I may trust you. This trust is a very great one, for I am engaged just now in one of the greatest experiments--I may even say the greatest experiment --in the history of the world. I ask for your participation.”

“I shall be honoured.”

“It is indeed an honour. I will admit that I should have shared my labours with no one were it not that the gigantic nature of the undertaking calls for the highest technical skill. Now, Mr. Jones, having obtained your promise of inviolable secrecy, I come down to the essential point. It is this--that the world upon which we live is itself a living organism, endowed, as I believe, with a circulation, a respiration, and a nervous system of its own.” Clearly the man was a lunatic.

“Your brain, I observe,” he continued, “fails to register. But it will gradually absorb the idea.

You will recall how a moor or heath resembles the hairy side of a giant animal. A certain analogy runs through all nature. You will then consider the secular rise and fall of land, which indicates the slow respiration of the creature. Finally, you will note the fidgetings and scratchings which appear to our Lilliputian perceptions as earthquakes and convulsions.”

“What about volcanoes?” I asked.

“Tut, tut! They correspond to the heat spots upon our own bodies.”

My brain whirled as I tried to find some answer to these monstrous contentions.

“The temperature!” I cried. “Is it not a fact that it rises rapidly as one descends, and that the centre of the earth is liquid heat?”

He waved my assertion aside.

“You are probably aware, sir, since Council schools are now compulsory, that the earth is flattened at the poles. This means that the pole is nearer to the centre than any other point and would therefore be most affected by this heat of which you spoke. It is notorious, of course, that the conditions of the poles are tropical, is it not?”

“The whole idea is utterly new to me.”

“Of course it is. It is the privilege of the original thinker to put forward ideas which are new and usually unwelcome to the common clay. Now, sir, what is this?” He held up a small object which he had picked from the table.

“I should say it is a sea-urchin.”

“Exactly!” he cried, with an air of exaggerated surprise, as when an infant has done something clever. “It is a sea-urchin--a common echinus. Nature repeats itself in many forms regardless of the size. This echinus is a model, a prototype, of the world. You perceive that it is roughly circular, but flattened at the poles. Let us then regard the world as a huge echinus. What are your objections?”

My chief objection was that the thing was too absurd for argument, but I did not dare to say so. I fished around for some less sweeping assertion.

“A living creature needs food,” I said. “Where could the world sustain its huge bulk?”

“An excellent point--excellent!” said the Professor, with a huge air of patronage. “You have a quick eye for the obvious, though you are slow in realizing the more subtle implications. How does the world get nourishment? Again we turn to our little friend the echinus. The water which surrounds it flows through the tubes of this small creature and provides its nutrition.”

“Then you think that the water--”

“No, sir. The ether. The earth browses upon a circular path in the fields of space, and as it moves the ether is continually pouring through it and providing its vitality. Quite a

flock of other little world-echini are doing the same thing, Venus, Mars, and the rest, each with its own field for grazing.”

The man was clearly mad, but there was no arguing with him. He accepted my silence as agreement and smiled at me in most beneficent fashion.

“We are coming on, I perceive,” said he. “Light is beginning to break in. A little dazzling at first, no doubt, but we will soon get used to it. Pray give me your attention while I found one or two more observations upon this little creature in my hand.

“We will suppose that on this outer hard rind there were certain infinitely small insects which crawled upon the surface. Would the echinus ever be aware of their existence?”

“I should say not.”

“You can well imagine then, that the earth has not the least idea of the way in which it is utilized by the human race. It is quite unaware of this fungus growth of vegetation and evolution of tiny animalcules which has collected upon it during its travels round the sun as barnacles gather upon the ancient vessel. That is the present state of affairs, and that is what I propose to alter.”

I stared in amazement. “You propose to alter it?”

“I propose to let the earth know that there is at least one person, George Edward Challenger, who calls for attention--who, indeed, insists upon attention. It is certainly the first intimation it has ever had of the sort.”

“And how, sir, will you do this?”

“Ah, there we get down to business.

You have touched the spot. I will again call your attention to this interesting little creature which I hold in my hand. It is all nerves and sensibility beneath that protective crust. Is it not evident that if a parasitic animalcule desired to call its attention it would sink a hole in its shell and so stimulate its sensory apparatus?”

“Certainly.”

“Or, again, we will take the case of the homely flea or a mosquito which explores the surface of the human body. We may be unaware of its presence. But presently, when it sinks its proboscis through the skin, which is our crust, we are disagreeably reminded that we are not altogether alone. My plans now will no doubt begin to dawn upon you. Light breaks in the darkness.”

“Good heavens! You propose to sink a shaft through the earth’s crust?”

He closed his eyes with ineffable complacency.

“You see before you,” he said, “the first who will ever pierce that horny hide. I may even put it in the present tense and say who has pierced it.”

“You have done it!”

“With the very efficient aid of Morden and think I may say that I have done it. Several years of constant work which has been carried on night and day, and conducted by every known species of drill, borer, crusher, and explosive, has at last brought us to our goal.”

“You don’t mean to say you are through the crust!”

“If your expressions denote bewilderment they may pass. If they denote incredulity--”

“No, sir, nothing of the kind.”

“You will accept my statement without question. We are through the crust. It was exactly fourteen thousand four hundred and forty-two yards thick, or roughly eight miles. In the course of our sinking it may interest you to know that we have exposed a fortune in the matter of coal-beds which would probably in the long run defray the cost of the enterprise. Our chief difficulty has been the springs of water in the lower chalk and Hastings sands, but these we have overcome. The last stage has now been reached--and the last stage is none other than Mr. Peerless Jones. You, sir, represent the mosquito. Your Artesian borer takes the place of the stinging proboscis. The brain has done its work. Exit the thinker. Enter the mechanical one, the peerless one, with his rod of metal. Do I make myself clear?”

“You talk of eight miles!” I cried. “Are you aware, sir, that five thousand feet is considered nearly the limit for Artesian borings? I am acquainted with one in upper Silesia which is six thousand two hundred feet deep, but it is looked upon as a wonder.”

“You misunderstand me, Mr. Peerless. Either my explanation or your brain is at fault, and I will not insist upon which. I am well aware of the limits of Artesian borings, and it is not likely that I would have spent millions of pounds upon my colossal tunnel if a six-inch boring would have met my needs. All that I ask you is to have a drill ready which shall be as sharp as possible, not more than a hundred feet in length, and operated by an electric motor. An ordinary percussion drill driven home by a weight will meet every requirement.

“Why by an electric motor?”

“I am here, Mr. Jones, to give orders, not reasons. Before we finish it may happen--it may, I say, happen--that your very life may depend upon this drill being started from a distance by electricity. It can, I presume, be done?”

“Certainly it can be done.”

“Then prepare to do it. The matter is not yet ready for your actual presence, but your preparations may now be made. I have nothing more to say.”

“But it is essential,” I expostulated, “that you should let me know what soil the drill is to penetrate. Sand, or clay, or chalk would each need different treatment.”

“Let us say jelly,” said Challenger. “Yes, we will for the present suppose that you have to sink your drill into jelly. And now, Mr. Jones, I have matters of some importance to engage my mind, so I will wish you good morning. You can draw up a formal contract with mention of your charges for my Head of Works.”

I bowed and turned, but before I reached the door my curiosity overcame me.

He was already writing furiously with a quill pen screeching over the paper, and he looked up angrily at my interruption.

“Well, sir, what now? I had hoped you were gone.

“I only wished to ask you, sir, what the object of so extraordinary an experiment can be?”

“Away, sir, away!” he cried, angrily. “Raise your mind above the base mercantile and utilitarian needs of commerce. Shake off your paltry standards of business. Science seeks knowledge. Let the knowledge lead us where it will, we still must seek it. To know once for all what we are, why we are, where we are, is that not in itself the greatest of all human aspirations? Away, sir, away!”

His great black head was bowed over his papers once more and blended with his beard. The quill pen screeched more shrilly than ever. So I left him, this extraordinary

man, with my head in a whirl at the thought of the strange business in which I now found myself to be his partner.

When I got back to my office I found Ted Malone waiting with a broad grin upon his face to know the result of my interview.

“Well!” he cried. “None the worse? No case of assault and battery? You must have handled him very tactfully. What do you think of the old boy?”

“The most aggravating, insolent, intolerant, self-opinionated man I have ever met, but--”

“Exactly!” cried Malone. “We all come to that “but.” Of course, he is all you say and a lot more, but one feels that so big a man is not to be measured in our scale, and that we can endure from him what we would not stand from any other living mortal. Is that not so?”

“Well, I don’t know him well enough yet to say, but I will admit that if he is not a mere bullying megalomaniac, and if what he says is true, then he certainly is in a class by himself. But is it true?”

“Of course it is true. Challenger always delivers the goods. Now, where are you exactly in the matter? Has he told you about Hengist Down?”

“Yes, in a sketchy sort of way.”

“Well, you may take it from me that the whole thing is colossal colossal in conception and colossal in execution. He hates pressmen, but I am in his confidence, for he knows that I will publish no more than he authorizes. Therefore I have his plans, or some of his plans. He is such a deep old bird that one never is sure if one has really touched bottom. Anyhow, I know enough to assure you that Hengist Down is a practical proposition and nearly completed. My advice to you now is simply to await events, and meanwhile to get your gear all ready. You’ll hear soon enough either from him or from me.”

As it happened, it was from Malone himself that I heard. He came round quite early to my office some weeks later, as the bearer of a message.

“I’ve come from Challenger” said he.

“You are like the pilot fish to the shark.”

“I’m proud to be anything to him. He really is a wonder. He has done it all right. It’s your turn now, and then he is ready to ring up the curtain.”

“Well, I can’t believe it until I see it, but I have everything ready and loaded on a lorry. I could start it off at any moment.”

“Then do so at once. I’ve given you a tremendous character for energy and punctuality, so mind you don’t let me down. In the meantime, come down with me by rail and I will give you an idea of what has to be done.”

It was a lovely spring morning--May 22nd, to be exact--when we made that fateful journey which brought me on to a stage which is destined to be historical. On the way Malone handed me a note from Challenger which I was to accept as my instructions.

“Sir,” (it ran)--

“Upon arriving at Hengist Down you will put yourself at the disposal of Mr. Barforth, the Chief Engineer, who is in possession of my plans. My young friend, Malone, the bearer of this, is also in touch with me and may protect me from any personal contact. We have now experienced certain phenomena in the shaft at and below

the fourteen thousand-foot level which fully bear out my views as to the nature of a planetary body, but some more sensational proof is needed before I can hope to make an impression upon the torpid intelligence of the modern scientific world.

That proof you are destined to afford, and they to witness. As you descend in the lifts you will observe, presuming that you have the rare quality of observation, that you pass in succession the secondary chalk beds, the coal measures, some Devonian and Cambrian indications, and finally the granite, through which the greater part of our tunnel is conducted. The bottom is now covered with tarpaulin, which I order you not to tamper with, as any clumsy handling of the sensitive inner cuticle of the earth might bring about premature results. At my instruction, two strong beams have been laid across the shaft twenty feet above the bottom, with a space between them. This space will act as a clip to hold up your Artesian tube. Fifty feet of drill will suffice, twenty of which will project below the beams, so that the point of the drill comes nearly down to the tarpaulin. As you value your life do not let it go further. Thirty feet will then project upwards in the shaft, and when you have released it we may assume that not less than forty feet of drill will bury itself in the earth's substance. As this substance is very soft I find that you will probably need no driving power, and that simply a release of the tube will suffice by its own weight to drive it into the layer which we have uncovered. These instructions would seem to be sufficient for any ordinary intelligence, but I have little doubt that you will need more, which can be referred to me through our young friend, Malone.

“GEORGE EDWARD CHALLENGER.”

It can be imagined that when we arrived at the station of Storrington, near the northern foot of the South Downs, I was in a state of considerable nervous tension. A weather-worn Vauxhall thirty landaulette was awaiting us, and bumped us for six or seven miles over by-paths and lanes which, in spite of their natural seclusion, were deeply rutted and showed every sign of heavy traffic. A broken lorry lying in the grass at one point showed that others had found it rough going as well as we. Once a huge piece of machinery which seemed to be the valves and piston of a hydraulic pump projected itself, all rusted, from a clump of furze.

“That's Challenger's doing,” said Malone, grinning.

“Said it was one-tenth of an inch out of estimate, so he simply chucked it by the wayside.”

“With a lawsuit to follow, no doubt.”

“A lawsuit! My dear chap, we should have a court of our own. We have enough to keep a judge busy for a year. Government too. The old devil cares for no one. Rex v. George Challenger and George Challenger v. Rex. A nice devil's dance the two will have from one court to another. Well, here we are. All right, Jenkins, you can let us in!”

A huge man with a notable cauliflower ear was peering into the car, a scowl of suspicion upon his face. He relaxed and saluted as he recognized my companion.

“All right, Mr. Malone. I thought it was the American Associated Press.”

“Oh, they are on the track, are they?”

“They to-day, and The Times yesterday. Oh, they are buzzing round proper. Look at that!” He indicated a distant dot upon the sky-line.

“See that glint ! That's the telescope of the Chicago Daily News. Yes, they are fair after us now. I've seen 'em in rows, same as the crows, along the Beacon yonder.”

“Poor old Press gang!” said Malone, as we entered a gate in a formidable barbed wire fence. “I am one of them myself, and I know how it feels.

At this moment we heard a plaintive bleat behind us of “Malone! Ted Malone!” It came from a fat little man who had just arrived upon a motor-bike and was at present struggling in the Herculean grasp of the gatekeeper.

“Here, let me go!” he sputtered. “Keep your hands off! Malone, call off this gorilla of yours.”

“Let him go, Jenkins! He’s a friend of mine!” cried Malone. “Well, old bean, what is it? What are you after in these parts? Fleet Street is your stamping ground--not the wilds of Sussex.”

“You know what I am after perfectly well,” said our visitor. “I’ve got the assignment to write a story about Hengist Down and I can’t go home without the copy.”

“Sorry, Roy, but you can’t get anything here.

You’ll have to stay on that side of the wire. If you want more you must go and see Professor Challenger and get his leave.”

“I’ve been,” said the journalist, ruefully. “I went this morning.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“He said he would put me through the window.”

Malone laughed.

“And what did you say?”

“I said, “What’s wrong with the door?” and I skipped through it just to show there was nothing wrong with it. It was no time for argument. I just went. What with that bearded Assyrian bull in London, and this Thug down here, who has ruined my clean celluloid, you seem to be keeping queer company, Ted Malone.”

“I can’t help you, Roy; I would if I could. They say in Fleet Street that you have never been beaten, but you are up against it this time. Get back to the office, and if you just wait a few days I’ll give you the news as soon as the old man allows.”

“No chance of getting in?”

“Not an earthly.”

“Money no object?”

“You should know better than to say that.”

“They tell me it’s a short cut to New Zealand.”

“It will be a short cut to the hospital if you butt in here, Roy. Good-bye, now. We have some work to do of our own.

“That’s Roy Perkins, the war correspondent,” said Malone as we walked across the compound. “We’ve broken his record, for he is supposed to be undefeatable. It’s his fat, little innocent face that carries him through everything. We were on the same staff once. Now there”--he pointed to a cluster of pleasant red-roofed bungalows--“are the quarters of the men. They are a splendid lot of picked workers who are paid far above ordinary rates. They have to be bachelors and teetotallers, and under oath of secrecy. I don’t think there has been any leakage up to now. That field is their football ground and the detached house is their library and recreation room. The old man is some organizer, I can assure you. This is Mr. Barforth, the head engineer-in-charge.”

A long, thin, melancholy man with deep lines of anxiety upon his face had appeared before us. “I expect you are the Artesian engineer,” said he, in a gloomy voice. “I was told to expect you. I am glad you’ve come, for I don’t mind telling you that the

responsibility of this thing is getting on my nerves. We work away, and I never know if it's a gush of chalk water, or a seam of coal, or a squirt of petroleum, or maybe a touch of hell fire that is coming next. We've been spared the last up to now, but you may make the connection for all I know."

"Is it so hot down there?"

"Well, it's hot. There's no denying it. And yet maybe it is not hotter than the barometric pressure and the confined space might account for. Of course, the ventilation is awful. We pump the air down, but two-hour shifts are the most the men can do--and they are willing lads too. The Professor was down yesterday, and he was very pleased with it all. You had best join us at lunch, and then you will see it for yourself."

After a hurried and frugal meal we were introduced with loving assiduity upon the part of the manager to the contents of his engine-house, and to the miscellaneous scrapheap of disused implements with which the grass was littered. On one side was a huge dismantled Arrol hydraulic shovel, with which the first excavations had been rapidly made. Beside it was a great engine which worked a continuous steel rope on which the skips were fastened which drew up the debris by successive stages from the bottom of the shaft. In the power-house were several Escher Wyss turbines of great horse-power running at one hundred and forty revolutions a minute and governing hydraulic accumulators which evolved a pressure of fourteen hundred pounds per square inch, passing in three-inch pipes down the shaft and operating four rock drills with hollow cutters of the Brandt type. Abutting upon the engine-house was the electric house supplying power for a very large lighting installment, and next to that again was an extra turbine of two hundred horse-power, which drove a ten-foot fan forcing air down a twelve-inch pipe to the bottom of the workings.

All these wonders were shown with many technical explanations by their proud operator, who was well on his way to boring me stiff, as I may in turn have done my reader. There came a welcome interruption, however, when I heard the roar of wheels and rejoiced to see my Leyland three-tonner come rolling and heaving over the grass, heaped up with tools and sections of tubing, and bearing my foreman, Peters, and a very grimy assistant in front. The two of them set to work at once to unload my stuff and to carry it in. Leaving them at their work, the manager, with Malone and myself, approached the shaft.

It was a wondrous place, on a very much larger scale than I had imagined. The spoil banks, which represented the thousands of tons removed, had been built up into a great horseshoe around it, which now made a considerable hill. In the concavity of this horseshoe, composed of chalk, clay, coal, and granite, there rose up a bristle of iron pillars and wheels from which the pumps and the lifts were operated. They connected with the brick power building which filled up the gap in the horseshoe. Beyond it lay the open mouth of the shaft, a huge yawning pit, some thirty or forty feet in diameter, lined and topped with brick and cement. As I craned my neck over the side and gazed down into the dreadful abyss, which I had been assured was eight miles deep, my brain reeled at the thought of what it represented. The sunlight struck the mouth of it diagonally, and I could only see some hundreds of yards of dirty white chalk, bricked here and there where the surface had seemed unstable. Even as I looked, however, I saw, far, far down in the darkness, a tiny speck of light, the smallest possible dot, but clear and steady against the inky background.

“What is that light?” I asked.

Malone bent over the parapet beside me.

“That’s one of the cages coming up,” said he. “Rather wonderful, is it not? That is a mile or more from us, and that little gleam is a powerful arc lamp. It travels quickly, and will be here in a few minutes.”

Sure enough the pin-point of light came larger and larger, until it flooded the tube with its silvery radiance, and I had to turn away my eyes from its blinding glare. A moment later the iron cage clashed up to the landing stage, and four men crawled out of it and passed on to the entrance.

“Nearly all in,” said Malone. “It is no joke to do a two-hour shift at that depth. Well, some of your stuff is ready to hand here. I suppose the best thing we can do is to go down. Then you will be able to judge the situation for yourself.”

There was an annexe to the engine-house into which he led me. A number of baggy suits of the lightest tussore material were hanging from the wall. Following Malone’s example I took off every stitch of my clothes, and put on one of these suits, together with a pair of rubber-soled slippers. Malone finished before I did and left the dressing-room. A moment later I heard a noise like ten dog-fights rolled into one, and rushing out I found my friend rolling on the ground with his arms round the workman who was helping to stack my artesian tubing. He was endeavouring to tear something from him to which the other was most desperately clinging. But Malone was too strong for him, tore the object out of his grasp, and danced upon it until it was shattered to pieces. Only then did I recognize that it was a photographic camera. My grimy-faced artisan rose ruefully from the floor.

“Confound you, Ted Malone!” said he. “That was a new ten-guinea machine.”

“Can’t help it, Roy. I saw you take the snap, and there was only one thing to do.”

“How the devil did you get mixed up with my outfit?” I asked, with righteous indignation.

The rascal winked and grinned. “There are always and means,” said he.

“But don’t blame your foreman. He thought it was just a rag. I swapped clothes with his assistant, and in I came.”

“And out you go,” said Malone. “No use arguing, Roy. If Challenger were here he would set the dogs on you. I’ve been in a hole myself so I won’t be hard, but I am watch-dog here, and I can bite as well as bark.

Come on! Out you march!”

So our enterprising visitor was marched by two grinning workmen out of the compound. So now the public will at last understand the genesis of that wonderful four-column article headed “Mad Dream of a Scientist” with the subtitle. “A Bee-line to Australia,” which appeared in The Adviser some days later and brought Challenger to the verge of apoplexy, and the editor of The Adviser to the most disagreeable and dangerous interview of his lifetime. The article was a highly coloured and exaggerated account of the adventure of Roy Perkins, “our experienced war correspondent” and it contained such purple passages as “this hirsute bully of Enmore Gardens,” “a compound guarded by barbed wire, plug-uglies, and bloodhounds,” and finally, “I was dragged from the edge of the Anglo-Australian tunnel by two ruffians, the more savage being a jack-of-all trades whom I had previously known by sight as a hanger-on of the journalistic profession, while the other, a sinister figure in a strange tropical garb, was posing as an Artesian

engineer, though his appearance was more reminiscent of Whitechapel.” Having ticked us off in this way, the rascal had an elaborate description of rails at the pit mouth, and of a zigzag excavation by which funicular trains were to burrow into the earth.

The only practical inconvenience arising from the article was that it notably increased that line of loafers who sat upon the South Downs waiting for something to happen. The day came when it did happen and when they wished themselves elsewhere.

My foreman with his faked assistant had littered the place with all my apparatus, my bellbox, my crowsfoot, the V-drills, the rods, and the weight, but Malone insisted that we disregard all that and descend ourselves to the lowest level. To this end we entered the cage, which was of latticed steel, and in the company of the chief engineer we shot down into the bowels of the earth. There were a series of automatic lifts, each with its own operating station hollowed out in the side of the excavation. They operated with great speed, and the experience was more like a vertical railway journey than the deliberate fall which we associate with the British lift.

Since the cage was latticed and brightly illuminated, we had a clear view of the strata which we passed. I was conscious of each of them as we flashed past. There were the sallow lower chalk, the coffee-coloured Hastings beds, the lighter Ashburnham beds, the dark carboniferous clays, and then, gleaming in the electric light, band after band of jet-black, sparkling coal alternating with the rings of clay. Here and there brickwork had been inserted, but as a rule the shaft was self-supported, and one could but marvel at the immense labour and mechanical skill which it represented. Beneath the coal-beds I was conscious of jumbled strata of a concrete-like appearance, and then we shot down into the primitive granite, where the quartz crystals gleamed and twinkled as if the dark walls were sown with the dust of diamonds. Down we went and ever down--lower now than ever mortals had ever before penetrated. The archaic rocks varied wonderfully in colour, and I can never forget one broad belt of rose-coloured felspar, which shone with an unearthly beauty before our powerful lamps. Stage after stage, and lift after lift, the air getting ever closer and hotter until even the light tussore garments were intolerable and the sweat was pouring down into those rubber-soled slippers. At last, just as I was thinking that I could stand it no more, the last lift came to a stand and we stepped out upon a circular platform which had been cut in the rock. I noticed that Malone gave a curiously suspicious glance round at the walls as he did so. If I did not know him to be amongst the bravest of men, I should say that he was exceedingly nervous.

“Funny-looking stuff,” said the chief engineer, passing his hand over the nearest section of rock. He held it to the light and showed that it was glistening with a curious slimy scum.

“There have been shiverings and tremblings down here. I don’t know what we are dealing with. The Professor seems pleased with it, but it’s all new to me.”

“I am bound to say I’ve seen that wall fairly shake itself,” said Malone. “Last time I was down here we fixed those two cross-beams for your drill, and when we cut into it for the supports it winced at every stroke. The old man’s theory seemed absurd in solid old London town, but down here, eight miles under the surface, I am not so sure about it.”

“If you saw what was under that tarpaulin you would be even less sure,” said the engineer. “All this lower rock cut like cheese, and when we were through it we came on a new formation like nothing on earth. “Cover it up! Don’t touch it!” said the Professor. So we tarpaulined it according to his instructions, and there it lies.

“Could we not have a look?”

A frightened expression came over the engineer’s lugubrious countenance.

“It’s no joke disobeying the Professor,” said he. “He is so damn cunning, too, that you never know what check he has set on you. However, we’ll have a peep and chance it.”

He turned down our reflector lamp so that the light gleamed upon the black tarpaulin. Then he stooped and, seizing a rope which connected up with the corner of the covering, he disclosed half-a-dozen square yards of the surface beneath it.

It was a most extraordinary and terrifying sight. The floor consisted of some greyish material, glazed and shiny, which rose and fell in slow palpitation. The throbs were not direct, but gave the impression of a gentle ripple or rhythm, which ran across the surface. This surface itself was not entirely homogeneous, but beneath it, seen as through ground glass, there were dim whitish patches or vacuoles, which varied constantly in shape and size. We stood all three gazing spell-bound at this extraordinary sight.

“Does look rather like a skinned animal,” said Malone, in an awed whisper. “The old man may not be so far out with his blessed echinus.”

“Good Lord!” I cried. “And am I to plunge a harpoon into that beast!”

“That’s your privilege, my son,” said Malone, “and, sad to relate, unless I give it a miss in baulk, I shall have to be at your side when you do it.”

“Well, I won’t,” said the head engineer, with decision.

“I was never clearer on anything than I am on that. If the old man insists, then I resign my portfolio. Good Lord, look at that!”

The grey surface gave a sudden heave upwards, welling towards us as a wave does when you look down from the bulwarks. Then it subsided and the dim beatings and throbbings continued as before. Barforth lowered the rope and replaced the tarpaulin.

“Seemed almost as if it knew we were here,” said he.

“Why should it swell up towards us like that? I expect the light had some sort of effect upon it.”

“What am I expected to do now?” I asked. Mr. Barforth pointed to two beams which lay across the pit just under the stopping place of the lift. There was an interval of about nine inches between them.

“That was the old man’s idea,” said he. “I think I could have fixed it better, but you might as well try to argue with a mad buffalo. It is easier and safer just to do whatever he says. His idea is that you should use your six-inch bore and fasten it in some way between these supports.”

“Well, I don’t think there would be much difficulty about that,” I answered. “I’ll take the job over as from to-day.”

It was, as one might imagine, the strangest experience of my very varied life which has included well-sinking in every continent upon earth. As Professor Challenger was so insistent that the operation should be started from a distance, and as I began to see a good deal of sense in his contention, I had to plan some method of electric control, which was easy enough as the pit was wired from top to bottom. With infinite care my foreman, Peters, and I brought down our lengths of tubing and stacked them on the rocky ledge. Then we raised the stage of the lowest lift so as to give ourselves room.

As we proposed to use the percussion system, for it would not do to trust entirely to gravity, we hung our hundred-pound weight over a pulley beneath the lift, and ran our

tubes down beneath it with a V-shaped terminal. Finally, the rope which held the weight was secured to the side of the shaft in such a way that an electrical discharge would release it. It was delicate and difficult work done in a more than tropical heat, and with the ever-present feeling that a slip of a foot or the dropping of a tool upon the tarpaulin beneath us might bring about some inconceivable catastrophe. We were awed, too, by our surroundings. Again and again I have seen a strange quiver and shiver pass down the walls, and have even felt a dull throb against my hands as I touched them. Neither Peters nor I were very sorry when we signalled for the last time that we were ready for the surface, and were able to report to Mr. Barforth that Professor Challenger could make his experiment as soon as he chose.

And it was not long that we had to wait. Only three days after my date of completion my notice arrived.

It was an ordinary invitation card such as one uses for "at homes," and it ran thus:

"PROFESSOR G. E. CHALLENGER,

"F.R.S. MD., D.Sc., etc.

"(late President Zoological Institute and holder of so many honorary degrees and appointments that they overtax the capacity of this card)

"requests the attendance of

"MR. JONES (no lady)

"at 11.30 a.m. of Tuesday, June 21st, to witness a

"remarkable triumph of mind over matter at

"HENGIST DOWN, SUSSEX.

"Special train Victoria 10.5. Passengers pay their own fares. Lunch after the experiment or not--according to circumstances. Station, Storrington.

"R.S.V.P. (and at once with name in block letters), 14 (Bis), Enmore Gardens, S.W."

I found that Malone had just received a similar missive over which he was chuckling.

"It is mere swank sending it to us," said he. "We have to be there whatever happens, as the hangman said to the murderer. But I tell you this has set all London buzzing. The old man is where he likes to be, with a pin-point limelight right on his hairy old head."

And so at last the great day came. Personally I thought it well to go down the night before so as to be sure that everything was in order. Our borer was fixed in position, the weight was adjusted, the electric contacts could be easily switched on, and I was satisfied that my own part in this strange experiment would be carried out without a hitch. The electric controls were operated at a point some five hundred yards from the mouth of the shaft, to minimize any personal danger. When on the fateful morning, an ideal English summer day, I came to the surface with my mind assured, I climbed half-way up the slope of the Down in order to have a general view of the proceedings.

All the world seemed to be coming to Hengist Down. As far as we could see the roads were dotted with people. Motor-cars came bumping and swaying down the lanes, and discharged their passengers at the gate of the compound. This was in most cases the end of their progress. A powerful band of janitors waited at the entrance, and no promises or bribes, but only the production of the coveted buff tickets, could get them any farther. They dispersed therefore and joined the vast crowd which was already assembling on the side of the hill and covering the ridge with a dense mass of spectators. The place was like

Epsom Downs on the Derby Day. Inside the compound certain areas had been wired-off, and the various privileged people were conducted to the particular pen to which they had been allotted. There was one for peers, one for members of the House of Commons, and one for the heads of learned societies and the men of fame in the scientific world, including Le Pellier of the Sorbonne and Dr. Driesinger of the Berlin Academy. A special reserved enclosure with sandbags and a corrugated iron roof was set aside for three members of the Royal Family.

At a quarter past eleven a succession of charr-a-bancs brought up specially-invited guests from the station and I went down into the compound to assist at the reception.

Professor Challenger stood by the select enclosure, resplendent in frock-coat, white waistcoat, and burnished top-hat, his expression a blend of overpowering and almost offensive benevolence, mixed with most portentous self-importance.

"Clearly a typical victim of the Jehovah complex," as one of his critics described him. He assisted in conducting and occasionally in propelling his guests into their proper places, and then, having gathered the elite of the company around him, he took his station upon the top of a convenient hillock and looked around him with the air of the chairman who expects some welcoming applause. As none was forthcoming, he plunged at once into his subject, his voice booming to the farthest extremities of the enclosure.

"Gentlemen," he roared, "upon this occasion I have no need to include the ladies. If I have not invited them to be present with us this morning it is not, I can assure you, for want of appreciation, for I may say"--with elephantine humour and mock modesty--"that the relations between us upon both sides have always been excellent, and indeed intimate. The real reason is that some small element of danger is involved in our experiment, though it is not sufficient to justify the discomposure which I see upon many of your faces. It will interest the members of the Press to know that I have reserved very special seats for them upon the spoil banks which immediately overlook the scene of the operation. They have shown an interest which is sometimes indistinguishable from impertinence in my affairs, so that on this occasion at least they cannot complain that I have been remiss in studying their convenience. If nothing happens, which is always possible, I have at least done my best for them. If, on the other hand, something does happen, they will be in an excellent position to experience and record it, should they ultimately feel equal to the task.

"It is, as you will readily understand, impossible for a man of science to explain to what I may describe, without undue disrespect, as the common herd, the various reasons for his conclusions or his actions. I hear some unmannerly interruptions, and I will ask the gentleman with the horn spectacles to cease waving his umbrella. (A voice: "Your description of your guests, sir, is most offensive.") Possibly it is my phrase, "the common herd," which has ruffled the gentleman. Let us say, then, that my listeners are a most uncommon herd. We will not quibble over phrases. I was about to say, before I was interrupted by this unseemly remark, that the whole matter is very fully and lucidly discussed in my forthcoming volume upon the earth, which I may describe with all due modesty as one of the epoch-making books of the world's history. (General interruption and cries of "Get down to the facts!" "What are we here for?" "Is this a practical joke?") I was about to make the matter clear, and if I have any further interruption I shall be compelled to take means to preserve decency and order, the lack of which is so painfully obvious. The position is, then, that I have sunk a shaft through the crust of the earth and

that I am about to try the effect of a vigorous stimulation of its sensory cortex, a delicate operation which will be carried out by my subordinates, Mr. Peerless Jones, a self-styled expert in Artesian borings, and Mr. Edward Malone, who represents myself upon this occasion. The exposed and sensitive substance will be pricked, and how it will react is a matter for conjecture. If you will now kindly take your seats these two gentlemen will descend into the pit and make the final adjustments. I will then press the electric button upon this table and the experiment will be complete.”

An audience after one of Challenger’s harangues usually felt as if, like the earth, its protective epidermis had been pierced and its nerves laid bare. This assembly was no exception, and there was a dull murmur of criticism and resentment as they returned to their places.

Challenger sat alone on the top of the mound, a small table beside him, his black mane and beard vibrating with excitement, a most portentous figure.

Neither Malone nor I could admire the scene, however, for we hurried off upon our extraordinary errand. Twenty minutes later we were at the bottom of the shaft, and had pulled the tarpaulin from the exposed surface.

It was an amazing sight which lay before us. By some strange cosmic telepathy the old planet seemed to know that an unheard-of liberty was about to be attempted. The exposed surface was like a boiling pot. Great grey bubbles rose and burst with a crackling report. The air-spaces and vacuoles below the skin separated and coalesced in an agitated activity. The transverse ripples were stronger and faster in their rhythm than before. A dark purple fluid appeared to pulse in the tortuous anastomoses of channels which lay under the surface. The throb of life was in it all. A heavy smell made the air hardly fit for human lungs.

My gaze was fixed upon this strange spectacle when Malone at my elbow gave a sudden gasp of alarm. “My God, Jones!” he cried. “Look there!”

I gave one glance, and the next instant I released the electric connection and I sprang into the lift. “Come on!” I cried. “It may be a race for life!”

What we had seen was indeed alarming. The whole lower shaft, it would seem, had shared in the increased activity which we had observed below, and the walls were throbbing and pulsing in sympathy. This movement had reacted upon the holes in which the beams rested, and it was clear that a very little further retraction--a matter of inches -- the beams would fall. If they did so then the sharp end of my rod would, of course, penetrate the earth quite independently of the electric release. Before that happened it was vital that Malone and I should be out of the shaft. To be eight miles down in the earth with the chance any instant of some extraordinary convulsion taking place was a terrible prospect. We fled wildly for the surface.

Shall either of us ever forget that nightmare journey? The lifts whizzed and buzzed and yet the minutes seemed to be hours. As we reached each stage we sprang out, jumped into the next lift, touched the release and flew onwards. Through the steel latticed roof we could see far away the little circle of light which marked the mouth of the shaft. Now it grew wider and wider, until it came full circle and our glad eyes rested upon the brickwork of the opening. Up we shot, and up --and then at last in a glad moment of joy and thankfulness we sprang out of our prison and had our feet upon the green sward once more. But it was touch and go. We had not gone thirty paces from the shaft when far

down in the depths my iron dart shot into the nerve ganglion of old Mother Earth and the great moment had arrived.

What was it happened? Neither Malone nor I was in a position to say, for both of us were swept off our feet as by a cyclone and swirled along the grass, revolving round and round like two curling stones upon an ice rink. At the same time our ears were assailed by the most horrible yell that ever yet was heard. Who is there of all the hundreds who have attempted it who has ever yet described adequately that terrible cry? It was a howl in which pain, anger, menace, and the outraged majesty of Nature all blended into one hideous shriek. For a full minute it lasted, a thousand sirens in one, paralysing all the great multitude with its fierce insistence, and floating away through the still summer air until it went echoing along the whole South Coast and even reached our French neighbours across the Channel. No sound in history has ever equalled the cry of the injured Earth.

Dazed and deafened, Malone and I were aware of the shock and of the sound, but it is from the narrative of others that we learned the other details of that extraordinary scene.

The first emergence from the bowels of the earth consisted of the lift cages. The other machinery being against the walls escaped the blast, but the solid floors of the cages took the full force of the upward current. When several separate pellets are placed in a blow-pipe they still shoot forth in their order and separately from each other.

So the fourteen lift cages appeared one after the other in the air, each soaring after the other, and describing a glorious parabola which landed one of them in the sea near Worthing pier, and a second one in a field not far from Chichester. Spectators have averred that of all the strange sights that they had ever seen nothing could exceed that of the fourteen lift cages sailing serenely through the blue heavens.

Then came the geyser. It was an enormous spout of vile treacly substance of the consistence of tar, which shot up into the air to a height which has been computed at two thousand feet. An inquisitive aeroplane, which had been hovering over the scene, was picked off as by an Archie and made a forced landing, man and machine buried in filth. This horrible stuff, which had a most penetrating and nauseous odour, may have represented the life blood of the planet, or it may be, as Professor Driesinger and the Berlin School maintain, that it is a protective secretion, analogous to that of the skunk, which Nature has provided in order to defend Mother Earth from intrusive Challengers. If that were so the prime offender, seated on his throne upon the hillock, escaped untarnished, while the unfortunate Press were so soaked and saturated, being in the direct line of fire, that none of them was capable of entering decent society for many weeks. This gush of putridity was blown southwards by the breeze, and descended upon the unhappy crowd who had waited so long and so patiently upon the crest of the Downs to see what would happen. There were no casualties. No home was left desolate, but many were made odoriferous, and still carry within their walls some souvenir of that great occasion.

And then came the closing of the pit. As Nature slowly closes a wound from below upwards, so does the Earth with extreme rapidity mend any rent which is made in its vital substance. There was a prolonged high-pitched crash as the sides of the shaft came together, the sound, reverberating from the depths and then rising higher and higher until with a deafening bang the brick circle at the orifice flattened out and clashed together,

while a tremor like a small earthquake shook down the spoil banks and piled a pyramid fifty feet high of debris and broken iron over the spot where the hole had been. Professor Challenger's experiment was not only finished, it was buried from human sight for ever. If it were not for the obelisk which has now been erected by the Royal Society it is doubtful if our descendants would ever know the exact site of that remarkable occurrence.

And then came the grand finale. For a long period after these successive phenomena there was a hush and a tense stillness as folk reassembled their wits and tried to realize exactly what had occurred and how it had come about. And then suddenly the mighty achievement, the huge sweep of the conception, the genius and wonder of the execution, broke upon their minds. With one impulse they turned upon Challenger. From every part of the field there came the cries of admiration, and from his hillock he could look down upon the lake of upturned faces broken only by the rise and fall of the waving handkerchiefs. As I look back I see him best as I saw him then. He rose from his chair, his eyes half closed, a smile of conscious merit upon his face, his left hand upon his hip, his right buried in the breast of his frock-coat. Surely that picture will be fixed for ever, for I heard the cameras clicking round me like crickets in a field.

The June sun shone golden upon him as he turned gravely bowing to each quarter of the compass. Challenger the super scientist, Challenger the arch-pioneer, Challenger the first man of all men whom Mother Earth had been compelled to recognize.

Only a word by way of epilogue. It is of course well known that the effect of the experiment was a world-wide one. It is true that nowhere did the injured planet emit such a howl as at the actual point of penetration, but she showed that she was indeed one entity by her conduct elsewhere. Through every vent and every volcano she voiced her indignation. Hecla bellowed until the Icelanders feared a cataclysm. Vesuvius blew its head off. Etna spewed up a quantity of lava, and a suit of half-a-million lira damages has been decided against Challenger in the Italian Courts for the destruction of vineyards. Even in Mexico and in the belt of Central America there were signs of intense Plutonic indignation, and the howls of Stromboli filled the whole Eastern Mediterranean. It has been the common ambition of mankind to set the whole world talking. To set the whole world screaming was the privilege of Challenger alone.

The End

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