

AT THE EARTH'S CORE

BY EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS, AUTHOR OF "TARZAN"



ROMANCE THRIVES WHEREVER THERE IS LIFE. THIS FUNDAMENTAL FACT BRIDGES A GAP OF PERHAPS MILLIONS OF YEARS IN CIVILIZATION AND BRINGS TOGETHER A MAN OF THE OUTER WORLD AND A WOMAN OF THE STRANGE LAND AT THE EARTH'S CORE

PREFACE

IN THE first place, please bear in mind that I do not expect you to believe this story. Nor could you wonder had you witnessed a recent experience of mine when, in the armor of blissful and unconscious ignorance, I gaily narrated the plot of it to a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society on the occasion of my last visit to London.

You would surely have thought that I had been detected in no less a heinous crime than the purloining of the crown jewels from the Tower or piping poison into the coffee of some king or other. The erudite gentlemen in whom I confided congenial before I was half through it is all that saved him from exploding—and my dreams of an honorary fellowship, gold medals, and a niche in the Hall of Fame faded into the thin, cold air of my arctic atmosphere.

But I believe the story, and so would you—and I would the learned fellow of the Royal Geographical Society—had you and he heard it from the lips of the man who told it to me.

Had you seen, as I did, the fire of truth in the gray eyes, had you felt the ring of sincerity in that quiet voice; had you realized the pathos of it all—you, too, would believe.

You would not have needed the final scientific proof that I had—the weird rhapsodical creature which he had brought back with him.

I came upon him quite suddenly, and so less unexpectedly, upon the rim of a gash in the Sahara. He was standing before a goatskin tent amid a clump of date-palms within a tiny oasis. Close by was an Arab dhow of some eight or ten tons, and some dozen from the north to him. My party consisted of a dozen children of the desert; I was the only "white" man.

As we approached the little clump of palms I saw the man come from his tent and with hand-shaded eyes peer intently at us.

"At sight of me he advanced rapidly to meet me."

"White man!" he cried. "May the good Lord be praised! I have been watching you for hours, hoping against hope that this time there would be a white man. Tell me the date. What year is it?"

And when I had told him he staggered as though he had been struck full in the face, so that he was compelled to grasp my arm for support.

"It cannot be!" he cried, after a moment. "It cannot be! Tell me that you are mistaken, or that you are joking."

"I am telling you the truth, my friend," I replied. "Why should I deceive a stranger, or attempt to, in so simple a matter as the date?"

"For some time he stood in silence, with bowed head."

"Ten years!" he murmured at last. "Ten years, and I thought that at the best it could be scarce more than one." "That night he told me his story—the story that I give you here as nearly in his own words as I can recall them.

CHAPTER I Toward Eternal Fires

I WAS born in Connecticut about 30 years ago. My name is David Innes. I am a graduate of Andover and Yale.

My father was a wealthy mine owner. When I was 19 he died. All his property was left to me when I had attained my majority—provided that I had devoted the two years intervening in close application to the great business I was to inherit.

I did my best to fulfill the last wishes of my parent—not because of the inheritance, but because I loved and honored my father. For a six months I toiled in the mines and in the counting rooms, for I wished to know every minute detail of the business.

Then Perry interested me in his invention. He was an old fellow who had devoted his life to a mechanical subterranean prospector. As a relaxation he studied paleontology.

I looked over his plans, listened to his arguments, inspected his working models, and then, convinced, I advanced the funds necessary to construct a full-sized, practical prospector.

I shall not go into the details of its construction—it lies out there in the desert now—about two miles from here. Tomorrow you may care to ride out and see it.

Roughly, it is a steel cylinder 100 feet long and pointed so that it may turn and twist through solid rock if need be. At one end is a mighty revolving drill operated by an engine which Perry said generated more power to the cubic inch than any other engine did to the cubic foot. I remember that he used to claim that this invention alone would make us fabulously wealthy—we were going to make the whole thing public after the successful tests of our first secret trial. Perry never returned from that trial trip, and I only after ten years.

I recall as it were but yesterday the night of that momentous occasion upon which we were to test the practicability of that wondrous invention.

It was near midnight that we repaired to the lofty tower in which Perry had constructed his "iron mole," as he was wont to call the thing.

The great noise rested upon the bare earth of the floor. We passed through the doors into the outer jacket, secured these passing into the cabin, which contained the controlling mechanism within the inner tube, switched on the electric lights.

Perry looked to his generator; to the tank that held the life-giving chemicals with which he was to manufacture fresh air to replace that which we consumed in breathing; to his instruments for recording temperature, speed,

distance, and for examining the materials through which we were passing.

He tested the steering device, and overlooked the mighty coils which transmitted its maximum velocity to the giant drill at the nose of his strange craft.

Our seats, into which we strapped ourselves, were so arranged upon transverse bars that we would be upright whether the craft were going her way downward into the bowels of the earth, or running horizontally along some great seam of coal, or rising vertically toward the surface.

At length all was ready. Perry bowed his head in prayer. For a moment we were silent, and then the old man's hand grasped the starting lever. There was a frightful roaring beneath us, the glass frame trembled and vibrated—there was a rush of sound as the loose earth passed up through the hollow space between the inner and outer jackets to be deposited in our wake.

We were off!

The noise was deafening. The sensation was frightful. For a full minute neither of us could do aught but cling with the proverbial desperation of the drowning man to the handrails of our swinging seats. Then Perry glanced at the thermometer.

"Gad!" he cried. "It cannot be possible—quick! What does the distance meter read?"

That and the speedometer were both on my side of the cabin, and as I turned to take a reading from the former I could hear Perry muttering.

"Ten degrees rise. It cannot be possible."

Then I saw him tug frantically upon the steering wheel.

As I finally found the tiny needle in the dim light I translated Perry's evident excitement, and my heart sank within me. But when I spoke I hid the fear which haunted me.

"It will be 700 feet," Perry said, "by the time you can turn her into the horizontal."

"You'd better lend me a hand then, my boy," he replied, "for I cannot budge her out of the vertical unless you give me that combined strength may be equal to the task, for else we are lost."

I wormed my way to the old man's side with never a doubt but that the great weight would yield on the instant to the power of my young and vigorous muscles. Nor was my belief mere vanity, for always had my physique been the envy and despair of my fellows.

And for that very reason it had waxed even greater than nature had intended, since my natural pride in my great strength had led me to care for and develop my body and my muscles by every means within my power. Whether boxing, football and baseball I had been in training since childhood.

And so it was with the utmost confidence that I laid hold of the huge iron rim; but though I threw every ounce of my strength into it my best effort was as unavailing as Perry's had been—the thing would not budge. The grim, insensate, horrible thing that was holding us upon the straight road to death!

At length I gave up the useless struggle, and without a word returned to my seat. There was no need for words—at least none that I could imagine, unless Perry desired to pray. And I was quite sure that he would, for he never left an opportunity neglected where he might sandwich in a prayer.

He prayed when he rose in the morning, he prayed before he ate, he prayed when he had finished eating, and before he went to bed at night, he prayed. In between he often found excuses to pray, even when the provocation seemed rather far-fetched to my worldly eyes—now that he was about to die I felt positive that I should witness a perfect orgy of prayer; if one may allude with such a simile to so solemn an act.

But to my astonishment I discovered that with death staring him in the face, and the world transformed into a new being, from his lips there flowed—not prayer—but a clear and limpid stream of undiluted profanity, and it was all direct, and it was sufficient to bear us in safety through 800 miles of rock to the antipodes.

"If the crust is of sufficient thickness we shall come to a final stop between 600 and 700 miles beneath the earth's surface; but during the last 150 miles of our journey we shall be corpses. Am I correct?" I asked.

"Quite correct, David. Are you frightened?"

"I do not know. It has all come so suddenly that I scarce believe that either of us realize the real terrors of our position. I feel that I should be reduced to panic; but yet I am not. I imagine that the shock has been so great as to stun our sensibilities."

Again I turned to the thermometer. The mercury was rising with less rapidity. It was now but 18 degrees, although we had penetrated to a depth of nearly four miles. I told Perry and he smiled.

"We have shattered one theory at least," was his only comment, and then he returned to his self-assumed occupation of fluently cursing the steering wheel.

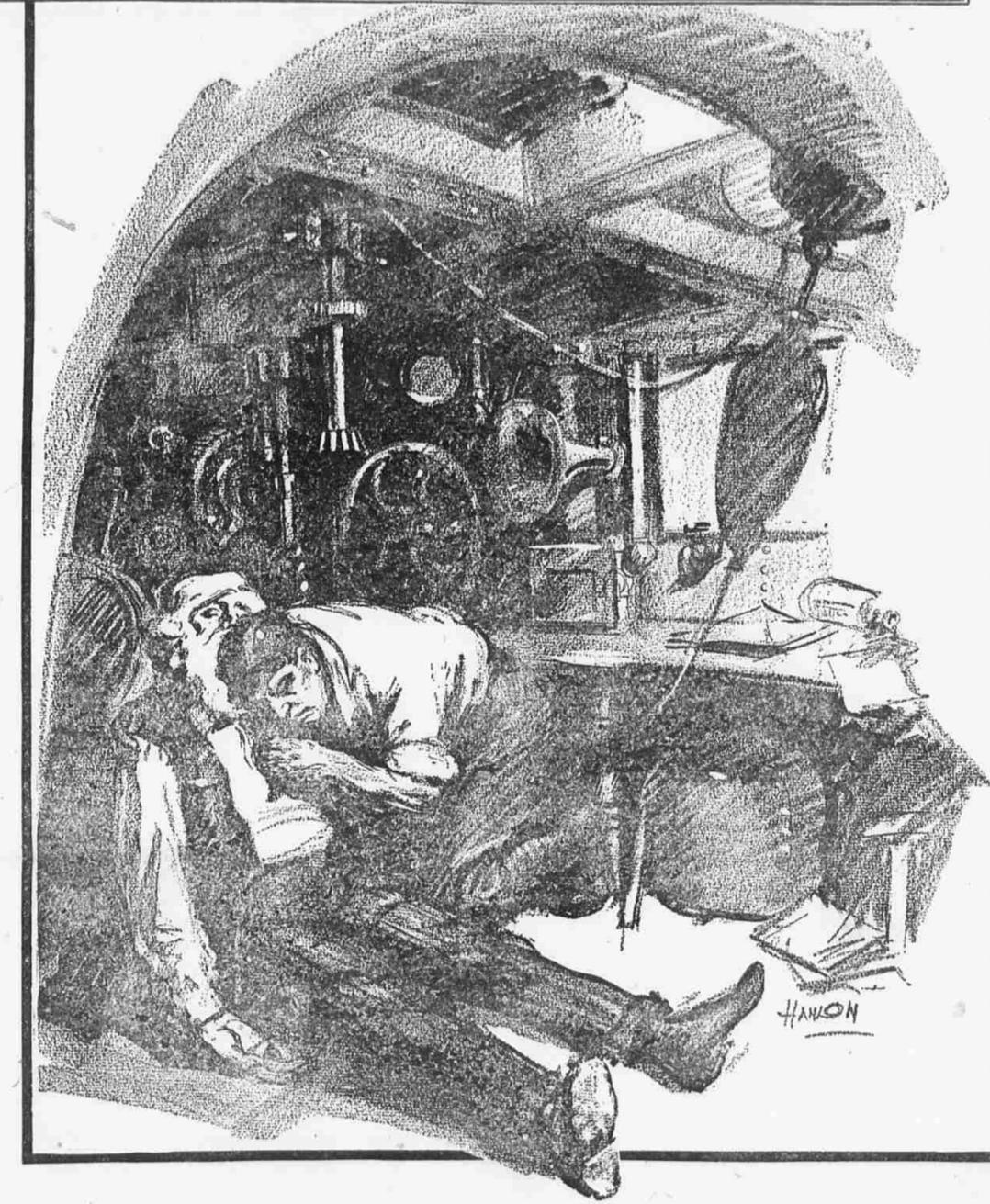
I once heard a pirate swear, but his best efforts would have seemed like those of a tyro alongside of Perry's masterful and scientific imprecations.

Once more I tried my hand at the wheel, but I might as well have endeavored to swing the earth itself. At my suggestion Perry stopped the generator, and as we came to rest I again threw all my strength into a supreme effort to move the thing even a hair's breadth, but the results were as barren as when we had been traveling at top speed.

I shook my head sadly, and motioned to the starting lever. Perry pulled it toward him, and once again we were plunging downward toward eternity at the rate of seven miles an hour. I sat with my eyes glued to the thermometer and the distance meter. The mercury was rising very slowly now, though even at 18 degrees it was almost unbearable within the narrow confines of our metal prison.

About noon, or 12 hours after our start upon this unfortunate journey, we had bored to a depth of 15 miles, at that point the mercury registered 22 degrees.

Perry was becoming more hopeful, though upon what measure food he sustained his optimism I could not conjecture. From cursing he had turned to shouting. I felt that the strain had at least



Tearing open his shirt, I placed my ear to his breast * * * His heart was beating quite regularly.

the most refractory substances at that distance beneath the surface.

"Another finds that the phenomena of precession and nutation require that the earth, if not entirely solid, must at least have a shell not less than 80 to a thousand miles in thickness. So there you are. You may take your choice."

"And if it should prove solid?" I asked.

"It will be all the same to us in the end," David replied. "At the best our oil fuel will suffice to carry us but three or four days, while our atmosphere cannot last to exceed that in safety through 800 miles of rock to the antipodes."

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For several hours we had not spoken except as he asked me for the readings of the instruments from time to time, and I announced them.

My thoughts were filled with vain regrets. I recalled numerous acts of my past life which I should have been glad to have had a few more years to live down. There was the affair in the Latin Commons at Andover when Calhoun and I had put gunpowder in the stove and nearly killed one of the masters. And then—

"But what was the use? I was about to die and atone for all these things and several more. Already the heat was sufficient to give me a foretaste of the hereafter. A few more degrees and I should lose consciousness."

"What are the readings now, David?" Perry's voice broke in upon my sombre reflections.

"Ninety miles and 18 degrees," I reported.

"Gad, but we've coked that 30-mile crust theory into a coked hat!" he cried gleefully.

"Precious lot of good it will do us," I growled back.

"But, my boy," he continued, "doesn't that temperature reading mean anything to you? Which I heard of heat was sufficient to give me a foretaste of the hereafter. A few more degrees and I should lose consciousness."

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ing into another series of ammonia-impregnated strata, where the mercury again fell to 19 below.

Slowly it rose once more until we were convinced that at last we were nearing the molten interior of the earth.

At 40 miles the temperature had reached 152 degrees. Feverishly I watched the thermometer. Slowly it rose. Perry had ceased singing and was at last praying.

Our hopes had received such a death blow that the gradually increasing heat seemed to our distorted imaginations much greater than it really was. For another hour I saw that pitiless column of mercury rise and rise until at 49 miles it stood at 153 degrees. Now it was that we began to hang upon those readings in almost breathless anxiety.

One hundred and fifty-three degrees had been the maximum temperature above the ice stratum. Would it stop at this point again or would it continue its merciless climb? We knew that there was no hope, and yet with the persistence of life itself we continued to hope against practical certainty.

Already the air tanks were at low ebb; there was barely enough of the precious gases to sustain us for another 12 hours. But would we be alive to know or care! It seemed incredible.

At 49 miles I took another reading.

"Perry!" I shouted. "Perry, man! She's going down! She's going down! She's going down! She's going down!"

"Gad!" he cried. "What can it mean? Can the earth be cold at the center?"

"I do not know, Perry," I answered. "But thank Heaven, if I am to die, it shall not be by fire—that is all that I have feared. I can face the thought of any death but that."

Down, down went the mercury until it stood as low as it had seven miles from the surface of the earth, and then of a sudden the realization broke upon us that death was very near.

Perry was the first to discover it. I saw him fusing with the valves that regulate the air supply. About the same time I began to experience difficulty in breathing. My head felt dizzy, my limbs heavy.

I saw Perry crumple in his seat. He gave himself a shake and sat erect again. Then he turned toward me.

"Good-by, David," he said. "I guess this is the end," and then he smiled and closed his eyes.

"Good-by, Perry, and good luck to you," I answered, smiling back at him. But I fought off that awful lethargy. I was very young; I did not want to die.

For an hour I battled against the cruelly enveloping death that surrounded me upon all sides. At first I found that by climbing high into the framework above me I could find more of the precious life-giving elements, and for a while these sustained me. At last I found that by must have been an hour after Perry succumbed, that I at least came to the

realization that I could no longer carry on this unequal struggle against the inevitable.

With my last flickering ray of consciousness I turned mechanically toward the distant meter. It stood at exactly 500 miles from the earth's surface—and suddenly the huge thing that bore us came to a stop.

The rattle of hurtling rock through the hollow jacket ceased. The wild racing of the giant drill betekened that it was running loose in air—and then another truth was above us. The point of the prospector was above us.

Slowly I dawned on me that since passing through the ice strata it had been upward toward the earth's crust.

"Thank God! We were safe!"

I put my nose to the intake pipe through which samples were to have been taken during the passage of the prospector through the earth, and my fondest hopes were realized. A flood of fresh air was pouring into the iron cabin.

The reaction left me in a state of collapse and I lost consciousness.

CHAPTER II In a Strange World

I WAS unconscious a little more than an instant, for as I lunged forward from the cross-beam to which I had been clinging and fell with a crash to the floor of the cabin, the shock brought me to myself.

My first concern was with Perry. I was horrified at the thought that upon the very threshold of salvation he might be dead.

Tearing open his shirt, I placed my ear to his breast. I could have cried with relief; his heart was beating quite regularly, reduced to mere specks; but ever beyond there was the sea, until the impression became quite real that one was looking up at the most distant point that the eye could fathom—the distance was lost in the distance.

"That was all. There was no clear-cut horizontal line marking the top of the globe below the line of vision."

"A great light is commencing to break on me," continued Perry, taking out his watch. "I believe that I have partially solved the riddle. It is now 2 o'clock. When we emerged from the prospector the sun was directly above us. Where is it now?"

I glanced up to find the great orb still motionless in the centre of the heavens. And such a sun! I had scarce noticed it before. Fully three times the size of the sun I had known throughout my life, and apparently so near that the sight of it carried the conviction that one might almost reach up and touch it.

"My God, Perry, where are we?" I exclaimed. "This thing is commencing to get on my nerves."

(CONTINUED IN MONDAY'S EVENING LEDGER)

us instead of below. We didn't notice it at the time, but I recall it now."

"You mean to say that we turned back in the ice stratum, David? That is not possible. The prospector cannot turn unless its nose is deflected. If the nose were deflected from the stratum by some external force or resistance—the steering wheel within would have moved in response. The steering wheel was not nudged, David, since we started. You know that."

I did know it; but here we were with our drill racing in pure air, and copious volumes of it pouring into the cabin.

"It couldn't have turned in the ice stratum, Perry. I know as well as you," I replied; "but the fact remains that we did, for here we are this minute at the surface of the earth again, and I am going out to see just where."

I glanced at the chronometer.

"Half after twelve. We have been out 72 hours, so it must be midnight. Nevertheless I'm going to have a look at the blessed sky that I had given up all hope of ever seeing again," and so saying I lifted the bars from the inner door and swung it open. There was quite a quantity of loose material in the jacket, and this I had to remove with a shovel to get at the opposite door in the outer shell.

In a short time I had removed enough of the earth and rock to the floor of the cabin to expose the door beyond. Perry was directly behind me as I threw it open. The upper half was above the surface of the ground at our backs.

With an expression of surprise I turned and looked at Perry. It was broad daylight without!

"Something seems to have gone wrong either with our calculations or the chronometer," I said.

Perry shook his head; there was a strange expression in his eyes.

"Let's have a look beyond that door, David," he cried.

Together we stepped out to stand in silent contemplation of a landscape at once weird and beautiful.

Before us a low and level shore stretched down to a silent sea. So far as the eye could reach the surface of the water was dotted with countless tiny islets—some of towering, barren granite rock, others resplendent in gorgeous trappings of tropical vegetation, myriad starred with the magnificent splendor of vivid blooms.

Behind us rose a dark and forbidding wall of giant arborescent ferns intermingled with the common types of a primeval tropical forest. Huge creepers depended in great loops from the trees, dense underbrush overgrew a tangled mass of fallen trunks and branches. Upon the outer verge we could see the same splendid colors, but within the dense shadows all seemed dark and gloomy as the grave.

And upon all the noonday sun poured its torrid rays out of a cloudless sky.

"Where on earth can we be?" I asked, turning to Perry.

For some moments the old man did not reply. He stood with his head buried in deep thought. But at last he spoke.

"David," he said, "I am not so sure that we are on earth."

"What do you mean, Perry?" I cried. "Do you think that we are dead, and that this is heaven?"

He smiled, and turning pointed to the nose of the prospector protruding from the ground at our backs.

"But for that, David, I might believe that we were indeed come to the country beyond the SIXX. The prospector renders that theory untenable. It certainly could never have gone to heaven. However, I am willing to concede that we may actually be in another world from that which we have always known. If we are not on earth, there is every reason to believe that we may be in it."

"We may have quartered through the earth's crust and come out upon some tropical island of the West Indies," I suggested.

Again Perry shook his head.

"Let us wait and see, David," he replied, "and in the meantime suppose we do a bit of exploring up and down the coast. We may find a native who can enlighten us on our whereabouts."

As we walked along the beach Perry gazed long and earnestly across the water. Evidently he was wrestling with a mighty problem.

"David," he said abruptly, "do you perceive anything unusual about the horizon?"

As I looked I began to appreciate the reason for the strangeness of the landscape that had haunted me from the first with an illusive suggestion of the bizarre and unnatural—there was no horizon!

So far as the eye could reach out to sea the sea continued and upon its bosom floated tiny islands, those in the distance reduced to mere specks; but ever beyond there was the sea, until the impression became quite real that one was looking up at the most distant point that the eye could fathom—the distance was lost in the distance.

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