

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns surrounds the text. The border is composed of repeating motifs of leaves, flowers, and scrolls, creating a classic, ornate frame.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Being Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's final account of
the adventures of Professor George E. Challenger
and Mr Edward D. Malone, as relayed via
spirit medium from beyond the grave

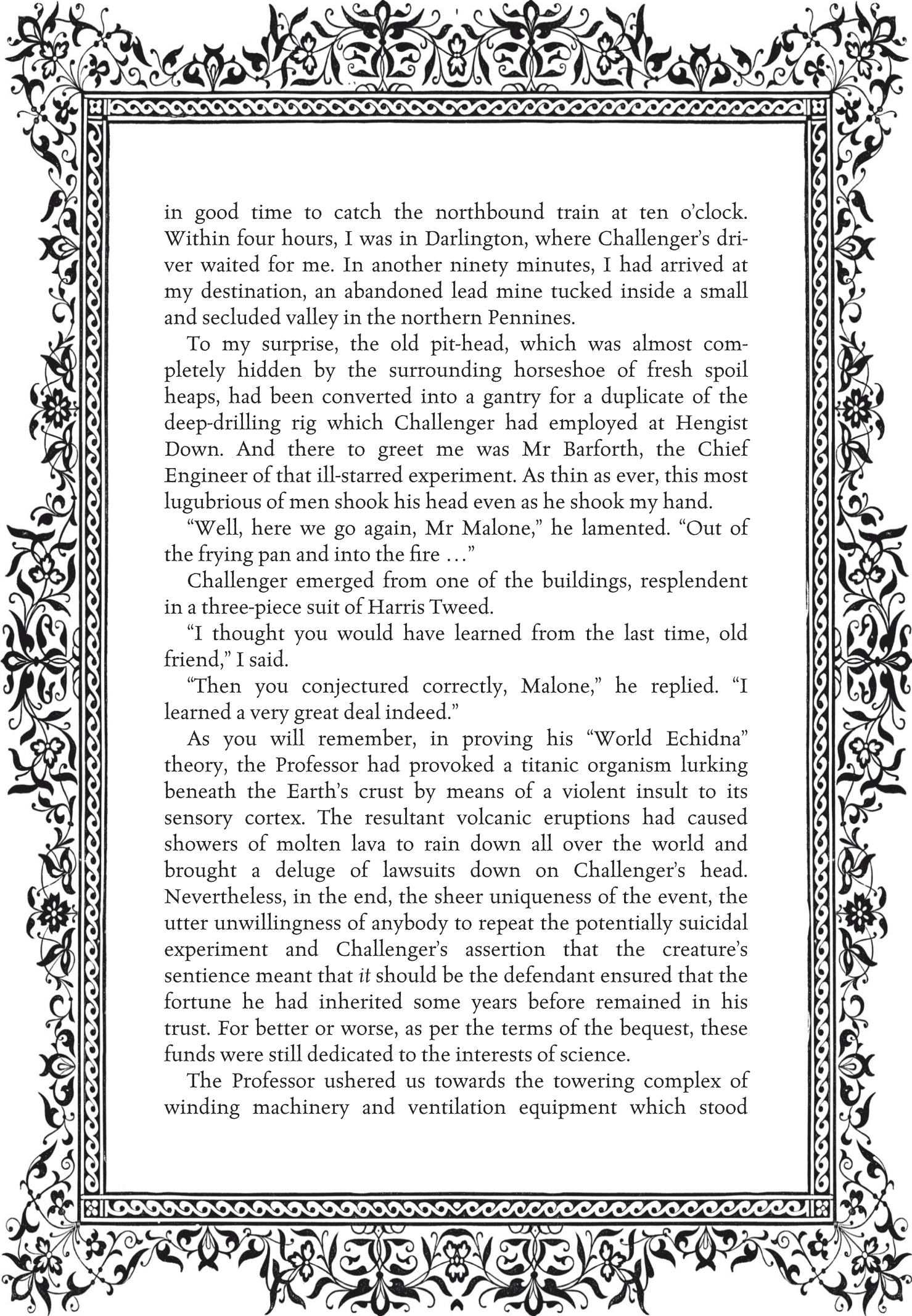
compiled and edited by Andrew J. Wilson

2. INTO THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH

Mr Beaumont, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Gazette*, was pleased enough with my firsthand account of "The Battle of Hobbs Lane" to grant me leave to accompany Challenger to Yorkshire, even though the Professor had refused to reveal the purpose of our sojourn until he saw fit. A scoop is a scoop, after all, and his exploits are a copper-bottomed guarantee of selling newspapers.

The arrangement was that we should travel within the week, and in the meantime, Challenger urged me to read *Eine Reise zum Mittelpunkt der Erde*, a contentious account of the Lidenbrock expedition of 1863. My rusty schoolboy German was barely adequate to the task, and the flagrantly erroneous descriptions of the interior of the Earth, combined with the implausible depth to which those involved claimed to have descended, left me at a loss as to why he should require me to study the tract. The only possible areas of interest, I decided at last, were the mentions of the existence of prehistoric species both in and around a subterranean sea. Our own discoveries in the lost world of Maple White Land did seem to give credence to this possibility, although the author's description of a vast pocket of electrically charged gas illuminating an enormous cavern stretched my credulity to its limit.

As it was, when the day came, the more commonplace tunnels of the London Underground brought me to King's Cross Station



in good time to catch the northbound train at ten o'clock. Within four hours, I was in Darlington, where Challenger's driver waited for me. In another ninety minutes, I had arrived at my destination, an abandoned lead mine tucked inside a small and secluded valley in the northern Pennines.

To my surprise, the old pit-head, which was almost completely hidden by the surrounding horseshoe of fresh spoil heaps, had been converted into a gantry for a duplicate of the deep-drilling rig which Challenger had employed at Hengist Down. And there to greet me was Mr Barforth, the Chief Engineer of that ill-starred experiment. As thin as ever, this most lugubrious of men shook his head even as he shook my hand.

"Well, here we go again, Mr Malone," he lamented. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire ..."

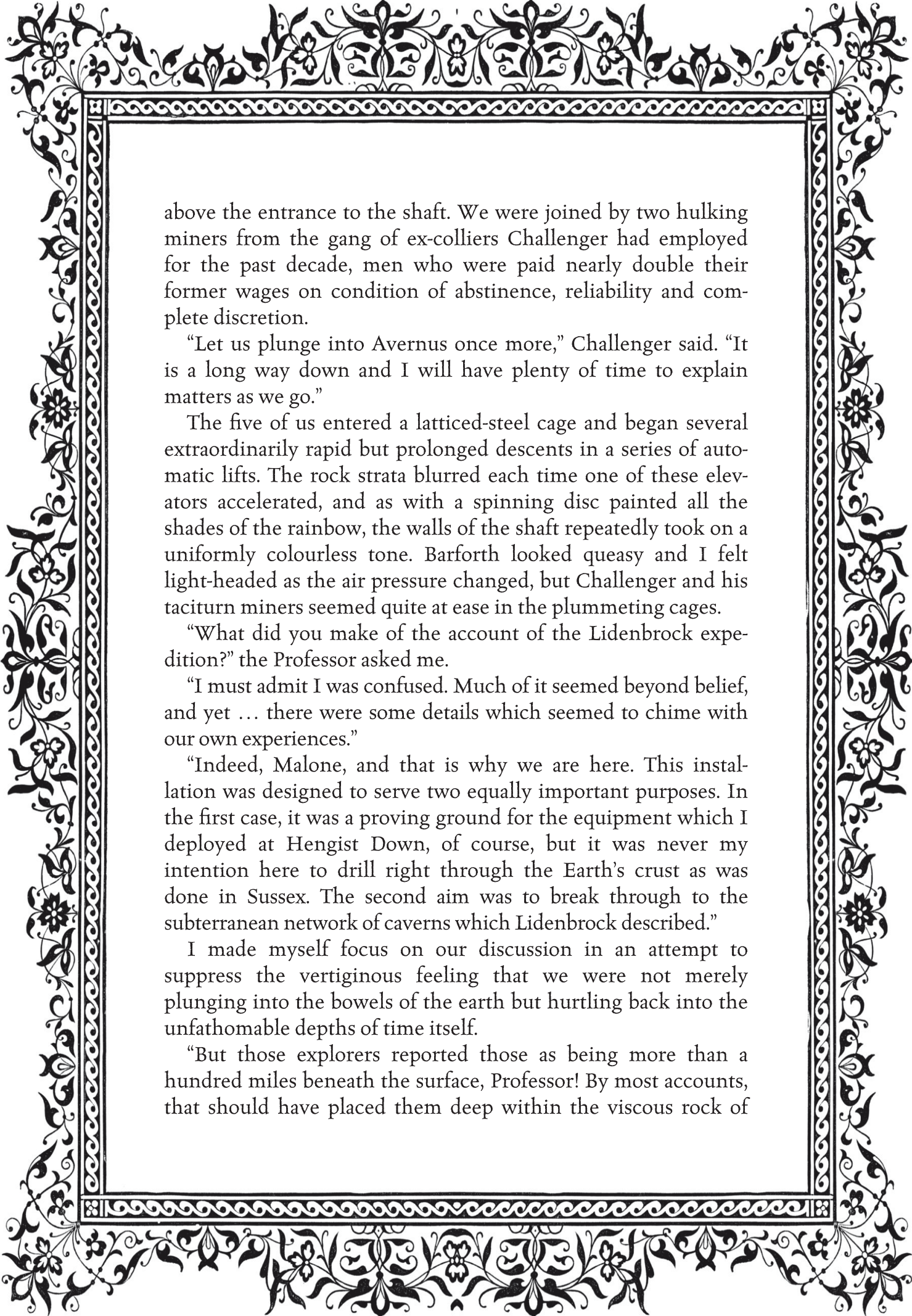
Challenger emerged from one of the buildings, resplendent in a three-piece suit of Harris Tweed.

"I thought you would have learned from the last time, old friend," I said.

"Then you conjectured correctly, Malone," he replied. "I learned a very great deal indeed."

As you will remember, in proving his "World Echidna" theory, the Professor had provoked a titanic organism lurking beneath the Earth's crust by means of a violent insult to its sensory cortex. The resultant volcanic eruptions had caused showers of molten lava to rain down all over the world and brought a deluge of lawsuits down on Challenger's head. Nevertheless, in the end, the sheer uniqueness of the event, the utter unwillingness of anybody to repeat the potentially suicidal experiment and Challenger's assertion that the creature's sentence meant that *it* should be the defendant ensured that the fortune he had inherited some years before remained in his trust. For better or worse, as per the terms of the bequest, these funds were still dedicated to the interests of science.

The Professor ushered us towards the towering complex of winding machinery and ventilation equipment which stood

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns surrounds the text. The border is composed of repeating motifs of leaves, flowers, and scrolls, creating a classic, ornate frame.

above the entrance to the shaft. We were joined by two hulking miners from the gang of ex-colliers Challenger had employed for the past decade, men who were paid nearly double their former wages on condition of abstinence, reliability and complete discretion.

“Let us plunge into Avernus once more,” Challenger said. “It is a long way down and I will have plenty of time to explain matters as we go.”

The five of us entered a latticed-steel cage and began several extraordinarily rapid but prolonged descents in a series of automatic lifts. The rock strata blurred each time one of these elevators accelerated, and as with a spinning disc painted all the shades of the rainbow, the walls of the shaft repeatedly took on a uniformly colourless tone. Barforth looked queasy and I felt light-headed as the air pressure changed, but Challenger and his taciturn miners seemed quite at ease in the plummeting cages.

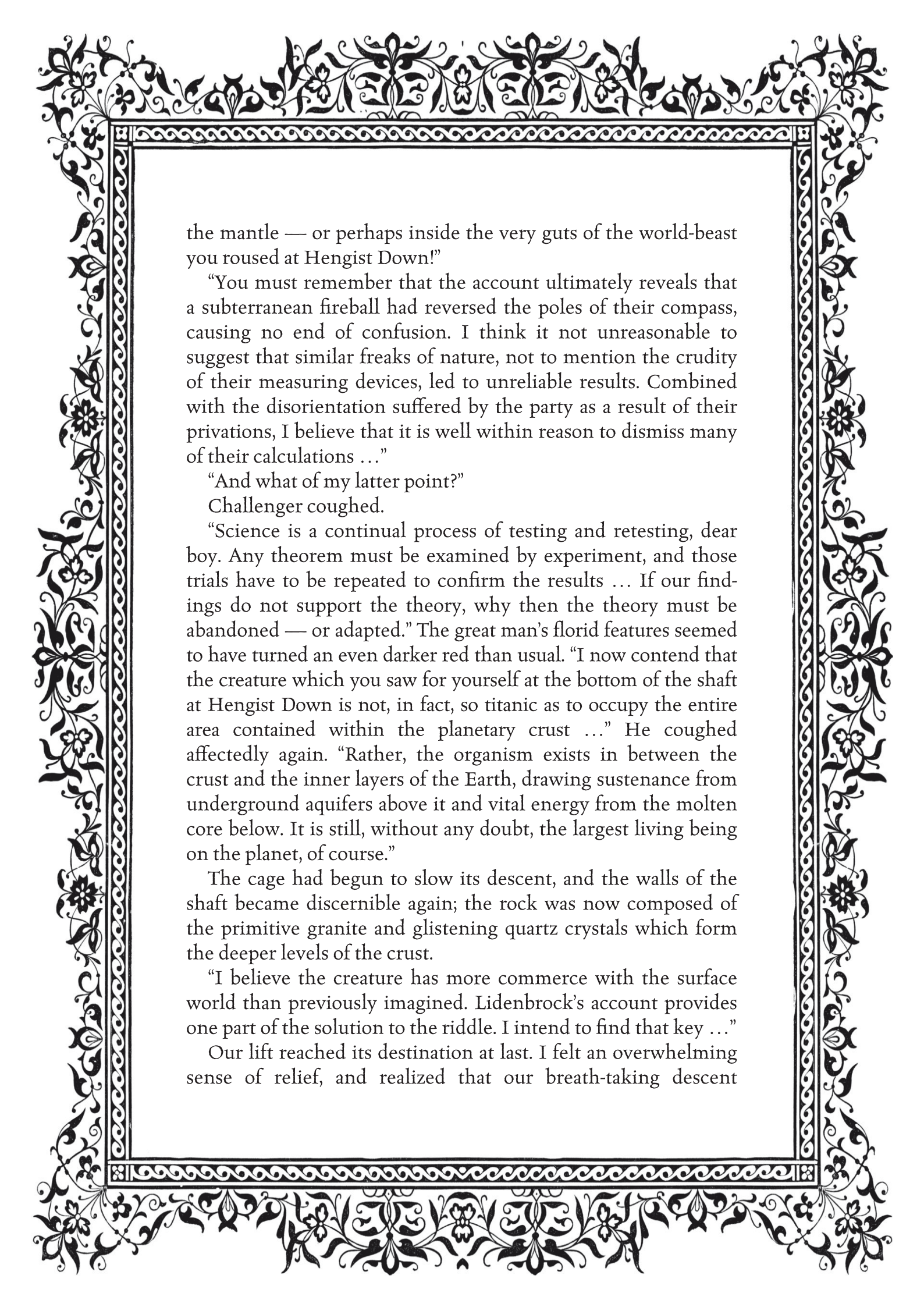
“What did you make of the account of the Lidenbrock expedition?” the Professor asked me.

“I must admit I was confused. Much of it seemed beyond belief, and yet ... there were some details which seemed to chime with our own experiences.”

“Indeed, Malone, and that is why we are here. This installation was designed to serve two equally important purposes. In the first case, it was a proving ground for the equipment which I deployed at Hengist Down, of course, but it was never my intention here to drill right through the Earth’s crust as was done in Sussex. The second aim was to break through to the subterranean network of caverns which Lidenbrock described.”

I made myself focus on our discussion in an attempt to suppress the vertiginous feeling that we were not merely plunging into the bowels of the earth but hurtling back into the unfathomable depths of time itself.

“But those explorers reported those as being more than a hundred miles beneath the surface, Professor! By most accounts, that should have placed them deep within the viscous rock of



the mantle — or perhaps inside the very guts of the world-beast you roused at Hengist Down!"

"You must remember that the account ultimately reveals that a subterranean fireball had reversed the poles of their compass, causing no end of confusion. I think it not unreasonable to suggest that similar freaks of nature, not to mention the crudity of their measuring devices, led to unreliable results. Combined with the disorientation suffered by the party as a result of their privations, I believe that it is well within reason to dismiss many of their calculations ..."

"And what of my latter point?"

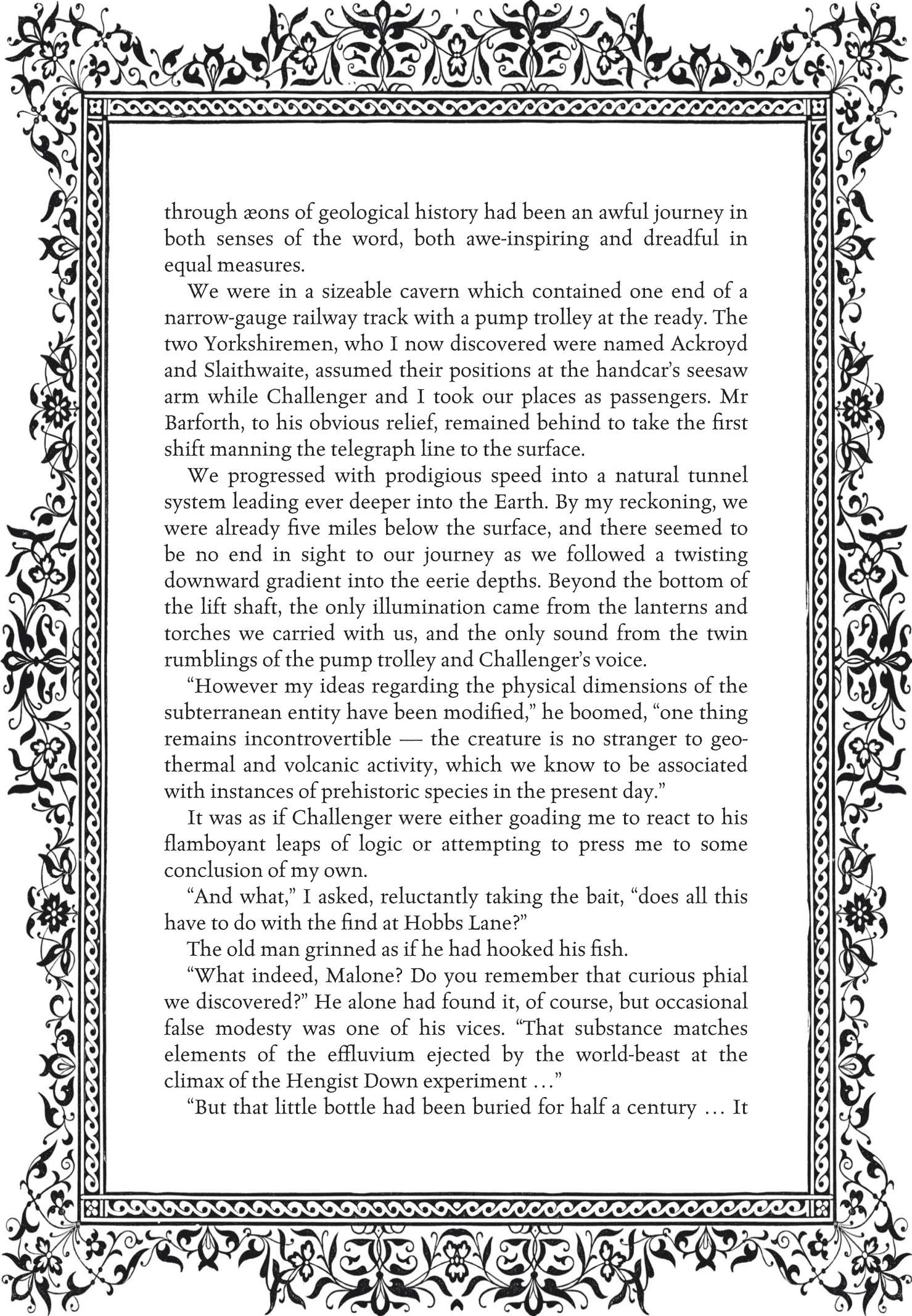
Challenger coughed.

"Science is a continual process of testing and retesting, dear boy. Any theorem must be examined by experiment, and those trials have to be repeated to confirm the results ... If our findings do not support the theory, why then the theory must be abandoned — or adapted." The great man's florid features seemed to have turned an even darker red than usual. "I now contend that the creature which you saw for yourself at the bottom of the shaft at Hengist Down is not, in fact, so titanic as to occupy the entire area contained within the planetary crust ..." He coughed affectedly again. "Rather, the organism exists in between the crust and the inner layers of the Earth, drawing sustenance from underground aquifers above it and vital energy from the molten core below. It is still, without any doubt, the largest living being on the planet, of course."

The cage had begun to slow its descent, and the walls of the shaft became discernible again; the rock was now composed of the primitive granite and glistening quartz crystals which form the deeper levels of the crust.

"I believe the creature has more commerce with the surface world than previously imagined. Lidenbrock's account provides one part of the solution to the riddle. I intend to find that key ..."

Our lift reached its destination at last. I felt an overwhelming sense of relief, and realized that our breath-taking descent



through æons of geological history had been an awful journey in both senses of the word, both awe-inspiring and dreadful in equal measures.

We were in a sizeable cavern which contained one end of a narrow-gauge railway track with a pump trolley at the ready. The two Yorkshiremen, who I now discovered were named Ackroyd and Slaithwaite, assumed their positions at the handcar's seesaw arm while Challenger and I took our places as passengers. Mr Barforth, to his obvious relief, remained behind to take the first shift manning the telegraph line to the surface.

We progressed with prodigious speed into a natural tunnel system leading ever deeper into the Earth. By my reckoning, we were already five miles below the surface, and there seemed to be no end in sight to our journey as we followed a twisting downward gradient into the eerie depths. Beyond the bottom of the lift shaft, the only illumination came from the lanterns and torches we carried with us, and the only sound from the twin rumblings of the pump trolley and Challenger's voice.

"However my ideas regarding the physical dimensions of the subterranean entity have been modified," he boomed, "one thing remains incontrovertible — the creature is no stranger to geothermal and volcanic activity, which we know to be associated with instances of prehistoric species in the present day."

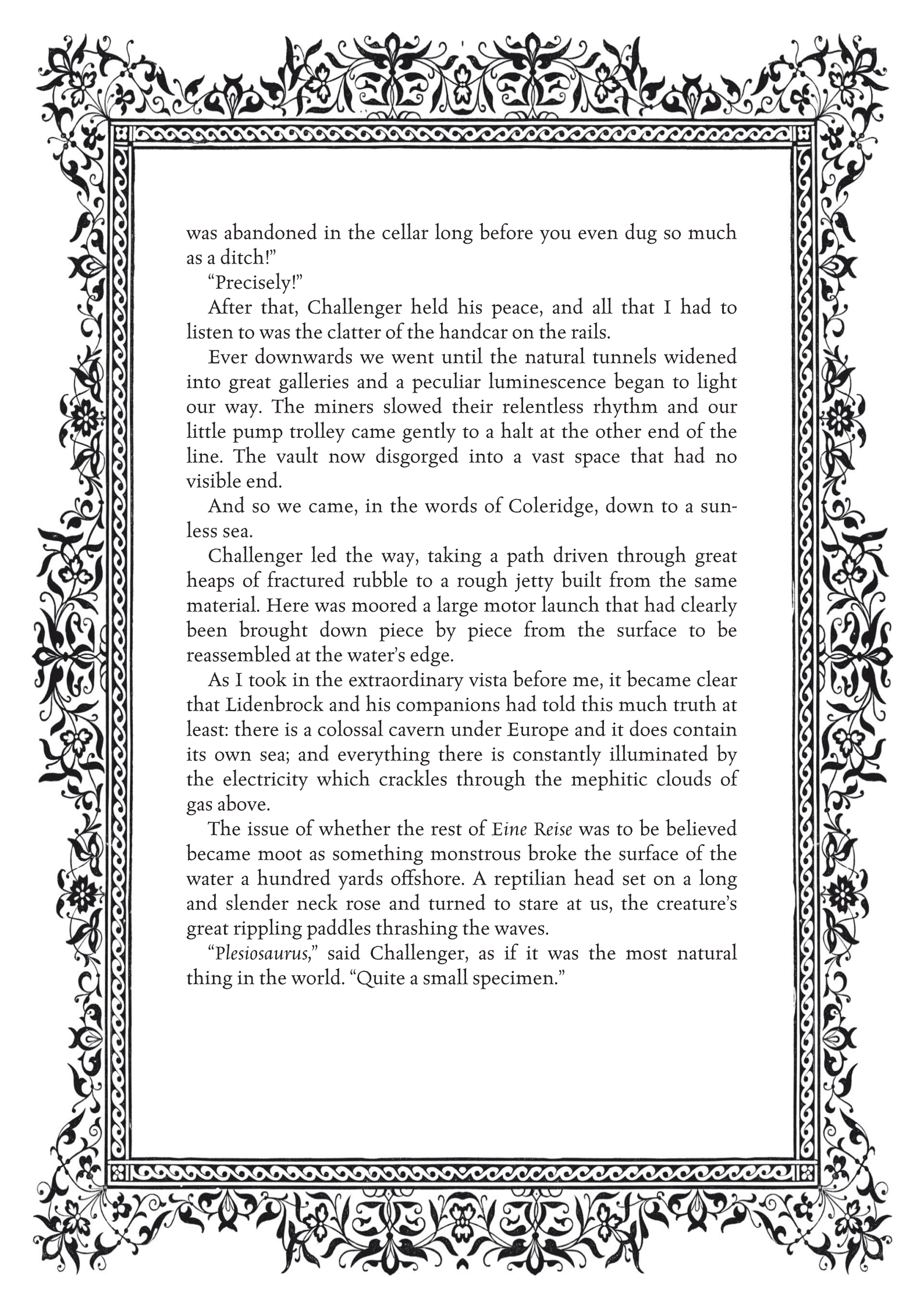
It was as if Challenger were either goading me to react to his flamboyant leaps of logic or attempting to press me to some conclusion of my own.

"And what," I asked, reluctantly taking the bait, "does all this have to do with the find at Hobbs Lane?"

The old man grinned as if he had hooked his fish.

"What indeed, Malone? Do you remember that curious phial we discovered?" He alone had found it, of course, but occasional false modesty was one of his vices. "That substance matches elements of the effluvium ejected by the world-beast at the climax of the Hengist Down experiment ..."

"But that little bottle had been buried for half a century ... It

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns surrounds the text. The border is composed of repeating motifs of leaves, flowers, and scrolls, creating a classic, ornate frame.

was abandoned in the cellar long before you even dug so much as a ditch!"

"Precisely!"

After that, Challenger held his peace, and all that I had to listen to was the clatter of the handcar on the rails.

Ever downwards we went until the natural tunnels widened into great galleries and a peculiar luminescence began to light our way. The miners slowed their relentless rhythm and our little pump trolley came gently to a halt at the other end of the line. The vault now disgorged into a vast space that had no visible end.

And so we came, in the words of Coleridge, down to a sunless sea.

Challenger led the way, taking a path driven through great heaps of fractured rubble to a rough jetty built from the same material. Here was moored a large motor launch that had clearly been brought down piece by piece from the surface to be reassembled at the water's edge.

As I took in the extraordinary vista before me, it became clear that Lidenbrock and his companions had told this much truth at least: there is a colossal cavern under Europe and it does contain its own sea; and everything there is constantly illuminated by the electricity which crackles through the mephitic clouds of gas above.

The issue of whether the rest of *Eine Reise* was to be believed became moot as something monstrous broke the surface of the water a hundred yards offshore. A reptilian head set on a long and slender neck rose and turned to stare at us, the creature's great rippling paddles thrashing the waves.

"*Plesiosaurus*," said Challenger, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "Quite a small specimen."

Out of the Depths will be serialised throughout February 2009 as part of the *One Book — One Edinburgh* reading campaign based around Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*.

You can read subsequent instalments by visiting:

www.cityoflitterature.com

The concluding segment will be performed live at *Doyle M For Murder* on Thursday 26th February, in the Pleasance Cabaret Bar, 60 The Pleasance, Edinburgh. The show begins at 8pm.

WRITERS ★ BLOC

www.writers-bloc.org.uk