



JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

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Introduction by Kim Stanley Robinson

EXCERPT

I

It was on Sunday, the 24th of May, 1863, that my uncle, Professor Lidenbrock, came rushing suddenly back to his little house in the old part of Hamburg, No. 19, Königstrasse.

Our good Martha could not but think she was very much behindhand with the dinner, for the pot was scarcely beginning to simmer, and I said to myself:

"Now, then, we'll have a fine outcry if my uncle is hungry, for he is the most impatient of mortals."

"Mr. Lidenbrock, already!" cried the poor woman, in dismay, half opening the dining-room door.

"Yes, Martha; but of course dinner can't be ready yet, for it is not two o'clock. It has only just struck the half-hour by St. Michael's."

"What brings Mr. Lidenbrock home, then?"

"He'll probably tell us that himself."

"Here he comes. I'll be off, Mr. Axel; you must make him listen to reason."

And forthwith she effected a safe retreat to her culinary laboratory.

I was left alone, but not feeling equal to the task of making the most irascible of professors listen to reason, was about to escape to my own little room upstairs, when the street-door creaked on its hinges, and the wooden stairs cracked beneath a hurried tread, and the master of the house came in and bolted across the dining-room, straight into his study. But, rapid as his flight was, he managed to fling his nutcracker-headed stick into a corner, and his wide-brimmed rough hat on the table, and to shout out to his nephew:

"Axel, follow me."

Before I had time to stir he called out again, in the most impatient tone imaginable:

"What! Not here yet?"

In an instant I was on my feet and in the study of my dreadful master.

Otto Lidenbrock was not a bad man. I grant that, willingly. But, unless he mightily changes, he will live and die a terrible original.

He was professor in the Johannæum, and gave the course of lectures on mineralogy, during which he regularly put himself into a passion once or twice. Not that he troubled himself much about the assiduity of his pupils, or the amount of attention they paid to his lessons, or their corresponding success. These points gave him no concern. He taught subjectively, to use a German philosophical expression, for himself, and not for others. He was a selfish savant—a well of science, and nothing could be drawn up from it without the grinding noise of the pulleys: in a word, he was a miser.

There are professors of this stamp in Germany.

My uncle, unfortunately, did not enjoy great facility of pronunciation, unless he was with intimate friends; at least,

not when he spoke in public, and this is a deplorable defect in an orator. In his demonstrations at the Johannæum the professor would often stop short, struggling with some obstinate word that refused to slip over his lips—one of those words which resist, swell out, and finally come forth in the anything but scientific shape of an oath. This put him in a great rage.

Now, in mineralogy, there are many names difficult to pronounce—half Greek, half Latin, barbarous appellations which would blister the lips of a poet. I have no wish to speak ill of the science. Far from it. But when one has to do with rhomboidal crystallisations, retinasphaltic resins, galena favosite, molybdates of lead, tungstates of manganese, and titanites of zircon, the most nimble tongue may be allowed to stumble.

The townsfolk were aware of this pardonable infirmity of my uncle's, and they took advantage of it, and were on the watch for the dangerous passages; and when he put himself in a fury laughed at him, which was not in good taste, even for Germans. His lectures were always very numerous attended, but how many of those who were most regular auditors came for anything else but to make game of the professor's grand fits of passion I shouldn't like to say. Whatever my uncle might be, and I can hardly say too much, he was a true savant.

Though he sometimes broke his specimens by his rough handling, he had both the genius of a geologist and the eye of a mineralogist. With his hammer and steel pointer and magnetic needle, his blow-pipe and his flask of nitric acid, he was a master indeed. By the fracture, the hardness, the fusibility, the ring, the smell, of any mineral whatever, he classed it without hesitation among the six hundred species science numbers to-day.

The name of Lidenbrock was consequently mentioned with hon-our in gymnasiums and national associations. Humphry Davy, Humboldt, and Captains Franklin and Sabine, paid him a visit when they passed through Hamburg. Becqueul, Ebolmann, Brewster, Dumas, Milne-Edwards, Sainte Clarice Deville, took pleasure in consulting him on the most stirring questions of chemistry, a science which was indebted to him for discoveries of considerable importance; and in 1853 a treatise on Transcendent Crystallography, by Professor Otto Lidenbrock, was published at Leipsic, a large folio, with plates, which did not pay its cost, however.

Moreover, my uncle was curator of the Museum of Mineralogy, belonging to M. Struve, the Russian ambassador, a valuable collection, of European celebrity.

Such, then, was the personage who summoned me so impatiently.

Fancy to yourself a tall, spare man, with an iron constitution, and a juvenile fairness of complexion, which took off full ten years of his fifty. His large eyes rolled about incessantly behind his great goggles; his long thin nose resembled a knife-blade; malicious people declared it was magnetised, and attracted steel filings—a pure calumny; it attracted nothing but snuff, but, to speak truth, a super-abundance of that. When I have added that my uncle made mathematical strides of three feet at every step, and marched along with his fists firmly clenched—a sign of an impetuous temperament—you will know enough of him not to be over-anxious for his company.

He lived in his little house in Königstrasse, a dwelling built partly of brick and partly of stone, with a crenated gable-end, which looked on to one of those winding canals which intersect each other in the centre of the oldest part of Hamburg, which happily escaped the great fire in 1842.

The old house leaned forward slightly, and bulged out towards the passers-by. The roof inclined to one side, in the position a German student belonging to the Tugendbund wears his cap. The perpendicular of the house was not quite exact, but, on the whole, the house stood well enough, thanks to an old elm, firmly imbedded in the façade, which pushed its flower buds across the window-panes in spring.

My uncle was pretty rich for a German professor. The house was his own, and all its belongings. These belongings were his godchild Gräuben, a Virland girl, seventeen years old, his servant Martha, and myself. In my double quality of nephew and orphan, I became his assistant in his experiments.

I must confess I have a great appetite for geological science. The blood of a mineralogist flows in my veins, and I never grow weary in the society of my beloved stones.

On the whole, it was possible to live happily in this little house in Königstrasse, notwithstanding the impatience of the owner; for though he had a rough fashion of showing it, he loved me for all that. But, the fact was, he was a man who could not wait, and was in a greater hurry than nature.

When he used to plant mignonette and convolvuluses in his terra-cotta pots in the spring, every morning he went regularly and pulled their leaves, to hasten their growth.

With such an original, there was no alternative but to obey, so I darted into the study immediately.

II

The study was a complete museum, every specimen of the mineral kingdom was to be found there, all labelled in the most perfect order, in accordance with the three great divisions of minerals—the inflammable, the metallic, and the lithoid.

How well I knew this alphabet of mineralogical science. How many a time, instead of loitering about with boys of my own age, I amused myself by dusting these graphites, and anthracites, and pit coal, and touch-stones; and the bitumens, and the resins, and organic soils, which had to be kept from the least particle of dust; and the metals, from iron up to gold, the relative value of which disappeared before the absolute equality of scientific specimens; and all those stones, enough to build the little house in the Königstrasse over again, and an extra room besides, which I would have fitted up so nicely for myself.

But when I entered the study now, I scarcely thought of those wonders. My mind was entirely occupied with my uncle. He had buried himself in his big arm-chair, covered with Utrecht velvet, and held a book in his hands, gazing at it with the most profound admiration.

"What a book! What a book!" he exclaimed.

This reminded me that Professor Lidenbrock was also given to bibliomania in his leisure moments; but an old book would have had no value in his eyes unless it could not be found anywhere else, or, at all events, could not be read.

"What! don't you see it, then?" he went on. "It is a priceless treasure! I discovered it this morning while I was rummaging about in Hevelin's, the Jew's shop."

"Magnificent!" I replied with forced enthusiasm.

Really, what was the good of making such a fuss about an old quarto volume, the back and sides of which seemed bound in coarse calf—a yellowish old book, with a faded tassel dangling from it?

However, the professor's vocabulary of adjectives was not yet exhausted.

"Look!" he said, asking himself questions, and answering them in the same breath; "is it handsome enough? Yes; it is first-rate. And what binding! Does it open easily? Yes, it lies open at any page, no matter where. And does it close well? Yes; for binding and leaves seem in one completely. Not a single breakage in this back after 700 years of existence! Ah! this is binding that Bozerian, Closs, and Purgold might have been proud of!"

All the while he was speaking, my uncle kept opening and shutting the old book. I could not do less than ask him about the contents, though I did not feel the least interest in the subject.

"And what is the title of this wonderful volume?" I asked.

"The title of it?" he replied, with increased animation. "The title is 'Heims Kringla,' by Snorre Turleson, the famous Icelandic author of the twelfth century. It is the chronicle of the Norwegian princes who reigned in Iceland."

"Indeed!" I said, doing my best to appear enthusiastic. "And it is translated into German, of course?"

"Translated!" cried the professor, in a sharp tone. "What should I do with a translation? Who cares for translations? It is the original work, in the Icelandic—that magnificent idiom at once grand and simple—which allows of the most varied grammatical combinations and most numerous modification of words."

"Like German," I said, making a lucky hit.

"Yes," replied my uncle, shrugging his shoulders; "without taking into account that the Icelandic language has the three numbers like the Greek, and declines proper names like the Latin."

"Does it?" said I, a little roused from my indifference. "And is the type good?"

"Type? Who is talking of type, you poor, ignorant Axel. So, you suppose this was printed! You ignoramus! It is a manuscript, and a Runic manuscript, too."

"Runic?"

"Yes. Are you going to ask me to explain that word, next?"

"Not if I know it," I replied, in a tone of wounded vanity.

But my uncle never heeded me, and went on with his instructions, telling me about things I did not care to know.

"The Runic characters were formerly used in Iceland, and, according to tradition, were invented by Odin himself. Look at them, and admire them, impious young man!—these types sprang from the imagination of a god."

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