

JULES VERNE

JOURNEY
TO THE
CENTRE
OF THE
EARTH





'Oh, no!' I cried, leaping to my feet. 'My uncle mustn't know about this! It would be the last straw if he got to hear of a journey of this sort. He would want to follow suit, and nothing would stop him, he such a fanatical geologist. He would set off in spite of everything, and he would take me with him, and we should never come back. Never! Never!'

JULES VERNE

INTRODUCED BY
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Introduction by Diana Wynne Jones

Journey to the Centre of the Earth is an astonishing book for many reasons. It certainly astonished me when I first read it at the age of ten – I couldn't put it down, and I wouldn't talk to anybody until I had finished it. It is one of the first pieces of science fiction ever written and, at the same time, a thoroughly exciting adventure story. It starts, as all good adventures should, with a coded message that has to be deciphered before the journey can begin; it has a surprise ending; and it contains the first-ever mad professor, Otto Lidenbrock. Every other mad professor ever since is simply an imitation of this one. But you have to be patient when you read it. It was written one hundred and forty years ago, which means it is sometimes long-winded and old-fashioned, but I assure you it gives good value in the end.

It is especially interesting to me because Jules Verne based his story on the theories of Humphry Davy, the scientist who investigated the effects of laughing gas and invented the lamps that miners wore fixed to the front of their helmets. Two hundred years ago, Davy lived in a house just around the corner from me. There was a big shed in the garden of this house where Davy did his experiments – I can see it from my window – and local tradition has it that he used to test laughing gas there on his friends, the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge among them, and all of them used to try it out once a week and laugh their heads off. They are knocking down this shed, very noisily, while I'm writing this, in order to build a new house. It occurs to me that Jules Verne might have based his mad professor on the character of Humphry Davy.

Davy had a lot to do with mining and he was convinced, unlike most other scientists, that the centre of the earth was not really made of hot, molten rock. He thought it might simply contain a lot of water. This is the theory that Jules Verne uses. Professor Otto Lidenbrock believes this theory with eccentric fervour and drags Axel, his poor, protesting nephew, off into the depths of the earth, where they do indeed find a lot of water. The great underground ocean is absolutely unforgettable. But if you read carefully, you will see that Jules Verne hedges his bets a little here. The explorers never actually get right to the centre of the earth. You think, *So of course* they never find molten rock! Then you think, *Hang on!* Nobody except mad Professor Lidenbrock has ever gone down there to look! Humphry Davy could be right after all. Like all good science fiction, this book really makes you *think*.

And here is another astonishing fact. When Jules Verne was a boy, he promised his mother he would never leave home – and he never did. He stayed in France and did all his exploring by reading books. He travelled only in his mind. But such is the power of his imagination that, when the travellers get to Iceland and finally plunge underground, you believe in what they find as if Jules Verne had been there himself and seen it with his own eyes. Jules Verne was an expert mind traveller. Journeying in

his head, he wrote this and at least two other adventure stories that are world-famous to this day.
Marvellous. Astonishing.



My Uncle Lidenbrock

On 24 May 1863, which was a Sunday, my uncle, Professor Lidenbrock, came rushing back towards his little house, No. 19 Königstrasse, one of the oldest streets in the old quarter of Hamburg.

Martha must have thought she was very behindhand, for the dinner was only just beginning to sizzle on the kitchen stove.

‘Well,’ I said to myself, ‘if my uncle is hungry he’ll make a dreadful fuss, for he’s the most impatient of men.’

‘Professor Lidenbrock here already!’ cried poor Martha in astonishment, half opening the dining-room door.

‘Yes, Martha; but don’t worry if the dinner isn’t cooked, because it isn’t two o’clock yet. St Michael’s clock has only just struck half past one.’

‘Then why is Professor Lidenbrock coming home?’

‘He’ll probably tell us himself.’

‘Here he is! I’m off, Mr Axel. You’ll get him to see reason, won’t you?’

And our good Martha went back to her culinary laboratory.

I was left alone. But as for getting the most irascible of professors to see reason, that was a task beyond a man of my rather undecided character. So I was getting ready to beat a prudent retreat to my little room upstairs, when the street door creaked on its hinges, heavy footsteps shook the wooden staircase, and the master of the house, passing through the dining-room, rushed straight into his study.

But on his way he had found time to fling his stick with the nutcracker head into a corner, his broad-brimmed hat on to the table, and these emphatic words at his nephew:

‘Axel, follow me!’

Before I had time to move, the Professor called to me again in an impatient voice:

‘Well, haven’t you got here yet?’

I rushed into my formidable master’s study.

Otto Lidenbrock was not, I must admit, a bad man; but, unless he changes in the most unlikely way, he will end up as a terrible eccentric.

He was a professor at the Johannaem and gave a course of lectures on mineralogy, during every one of which he lost his temper once or twice. Not that he cared whether his pupils attended regularly

listened attentively, or were successful later: these little matters interested him only very slightly. His teaching was what the German philosophers would call 'subjective': that is to say it was intended for himself and not for others. He was a selfish scholar, a well of science whose pulley creaked when you tried to draw anything out of it. In short, he was a miser. There are quite a few professors like that in Germany.

Unfortunately for him, my uncle had difficulty in speaking fluently, not so much at home as in public, and this is a regrettable defect in an orator. Indeed, in his lectures at the Johannaem the Professor would often stop short, struggling with a recalcitrant word which refused to slip between his lips, one of those words which resist, swell up, and finally come out in the rather unscientific form of a swear-word. This was what always sent him into a rage.

Now in mineralogy there are a great many barbarous terms, half Greek and half Latin, which are difficult to pronounce and which would take the skin off any poet's lips. I don't want to say a word against that science – far from it – but when one finds oneself in the presence of rhombohedral crystals, retinasphaltic resins, gehlenites, fangasites, molybdenites, tungstates of manganese, and titanite of zirconium, the nimblest tongue may be forgiven for slipping.

This pardonable infirmity of my uncle's was well known in the town and unfair advantage was taken of it; the students waited for the dangerous passages when he lost his temper and then burst out laughing, which is not in good taste, even in Germany. And if there was always a large audience at the Lidenbrock lectures, a great many of those present undoubtedly came with the chief object of amusing themselves at the spectacle of the Professor's rages.

However that may be, my uncle, as I have said before and cannot repeat too often, was a true scholar. Although he sometimes broke his specimens by handling them too roughly, he combined the genius of the geologist with the eye of the mineralogist. With his hammer, his steel pointer, his magnetic needle, his blowpipe, and his bottle of nitric acid, he was a force to be reckoned with. From the fracture, appearance, hardness, fusibility, sound, smell, and taste of any given mineral, he could unhesitatingly class it in its proper place among the six hundred species known to modern science.

The name of Lidenbrock was accordingly mentioned in tones of respect in all colleges and learned societies. Humphry Davy, Humboldt, Captain Franklin, and General Sabine never failed to call on him when passing through Hamburg; and Becquerel, Ebelman, Brewster, Dumas, Milne-Edwards, and Sainte-Claire Deville frequently consulted him about the most difficult problems in Chemistry.

This science was indebted to him for some remarkable discoveries, and in 1853 a *Treatise on Transcendental Crystallography* by Professor Otto Lidenbrock had appeared at Leipzig, an imposing folio volume with plates, which, however, failed to cover its expenses.

Over and above all this, I should add that my uncle was the curator of the mineralogical museum founded by Mr Struve, the Russian ambassador, a valuable collection known all over Europe.

This, then, was the gentleman who was calling me so impatiently. Picture to yourself a tall, thin man, in excellent health, and with a fair, youthful complexion which took off a good ten of his fifty years. His big eyes were constantly rolling behind huge spectacles; and his long thin nose looked like the blade of a knife. Mischievous students, indeed, asserted that it was magnetized and attracted iron filings. This was sheer calumny: it attracted nothing but snuff, though that in great abundance.

When I have added that my uncle took mathematical strides three feet long, and that as he walked

along he kept his fists tightly clenched, a sure sign of an impetuous temperament, you will know him well enough not to hanker after his company.

He lived in his own little house in the Königstrasse, a building which was half brick and half wood with an indented gable; it overlooked one of those winding canals which intersect in the middle of the oldest quarter of Hamburg, which the great fire of 1842 mercifully spared.

It is true that the old house was not exactly perpendicular, and bulged out a little towards the street; its roof was slightly askew, like the cap over the ear of a Tugendbund student; and the balance of its lines left something to be desired; but, all considering, it stood firm, thanks to an old elm which was solidly embedded in the façade and which in spring used to push its young sprays through the window panes.

My uncle was fairly well off for a German professor. The house belonged to him, both the building and its contents – the latter including his goddaughter Gräuben, a seventeen-year-old native of the Virlande, our good Martha, and myself. In my dual capacity of nephew and orphan I became his laboratory assistant.

I must admit that I took to geology enthusiastically; I had the blood of a mineralogist in my veins and I never felt bored in the company of my precious pebbles.

All in all, life was happy enough in that little house in the Königstrasse, in spite of the master's fit of temper, for although he was rather brusque with me he was fond of me all the same. But the man was incapable of waiting, and was always in a greater hurry than Nature. In April, after he had planted seedlings of mignonette or convolvulus in the earthenware pots in his drawing-room, he would go regularly every morning and pull them by the leaves to make them grow faster.

With such an eccentric character, obedience was the only course to adopt. I therefore rushed into his study.



The Strange Parchment

That study of his was a regular museum. Specimens of everything in the mineral world were to be found there, labelled with meticulous exactitude and arranged in the three great classes of inflammable, metallic, and lithoid minerals.

How well I knew them, those knicknacks of mineralogical science! How often, instead of frittering away my time with boys of my own age, I had enjoyed myself dusting those specimens of graphite, anthracite, coal, lignite, and peat! And those examples of bitumen, of resin, of organic salts which had to be protected from the smallest speck of dust! And those metals, from iron to gold, whose relative value was ignored in view of the absolute equality of scientific specimens! And all those stones which would have been enough to rebuild the whole Königstrasse house, and even add a splendid room which would have suited me admirably!

But as I went into the study, my mind was not on these wonders: my thoughts were entirely occupied by my uncle. He was ensconced in his big Utrecht velvet armchair, and was holding a book which he was considering with the profoundest admiration.

‘What a book!’ he was saying.

This exclamation reminded me that Professor Lidenbrock was also a bibliomaniac in his spare time, but a book had no value in his eyes unless it was unique or, at the very least, unreadable.

‘Well?’ he said. ‘Can’t you see what it is? It’s a priceless treasure that I found this morning, rummaging about in that Jew Hevelius’s bookshop.’

‘Splendid!’ I replied, with forced enthusiasm.

After all, why all this excitement about an old quarto volume whose covers seemed to be made of coarse calf, a yellowish book with a faded seal hanging from it?

But for all that the Professor went on uttering admiring exclamations.

‘Look,’ he said, asking and answering his own questions. ‘Isn’t it beautiful? Yes, it’s splendid! And what a binding! Does it open easily? Yes, and it stays open at any page you like. But does it close well? Yes, for the binding and the leaves form a compact whole, with no gaps or openings anywhere. And look at the back, which doesn’t show a single crack after seven hundred years! Now there’s a binding Bozerian, Closs, or Purgold would have been proud of!’

While saying all this, my uncle kept opening and shutting the old book. I could do no less than ask

him about its contents, although as a matter of fact they did not interest me in the slightest.

‘And what is the title of this wonderful work?’ I asked, with an eagerness which was too great not to be specious.

‘This work,’ replied my uncle with increasing excitement, ‘is the *Heims Kringla* of Snorro Turleson, the famous Icelandic writer of the twelfth century! It is the chronicle of the Norwegian princes who ruled over Iceland.’

‘Really?’ I cried, as heartily as I could. ‘I suppose this is a translation?’

‘What!’ roared the Professor. ‘What would I be doing with a translation? This is the original work in Icelandic, that magnificent language which is both rich and simple and allows an infinite variety of grammatical combinations and verbal modifications!’

‘Like German,’ I suggested, not altogether unhappily.

‘Yes,’ replied my uncle, shrugging his shoulders; ‘not to mention the fact that Icelandic has three genders like Greek and declines proper nouns like Latin.’

‘Ah!’ I said, slightly shaken in my indifference, ‘and is the type good?’

‘Type! Who said anything about type, you wretched boy? Type, indeed! Ah, you think it’s a printed book, do you? It’s a manuscript, you idiot, a Runic manuscript.’

‘Runic?’

‘Yes. Now I suppose you want me to explain what that means?’

‘Of course not,’ I replied in an injured voice. But my uncle took no notice, and told me, against my will, a good many things I was not particularly interested in learning.

‘The Runes,’ he said, ‘were letters of an alphabet used in Iceland in olden times, and legend has it that they were invented by Odin himself. Look at them, irreverent boy, and admire these characters sprung from a god’s imagination!’

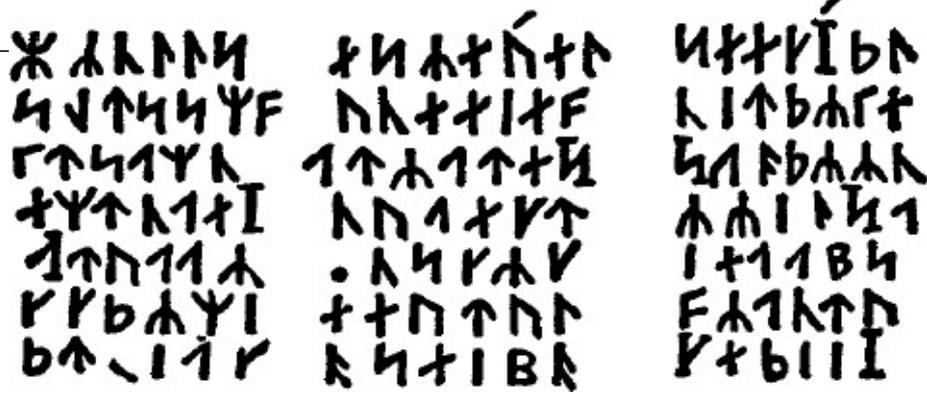
Not knowing what to say, I was going to prostrate myself before the book – a response which must give pleasure to gods as well as to kings, for it has the advantage of never causing them any embarrassment – when a little incident occurred which changed the course of the conversation. This was the appearance of a dirty piece of parchment which slipped out of the book and fell on the floor.

My uncle pounced upon this fragment with understandable eagerness. An old document, enclosed perhaps since immemorial time between the pages of an old book, was bound to have immeasurable value in his eyes.

‘What’s this?’ he cried.

And at the same time he carefully unfolded on his table a piece of parchment five inches by three, containing a few lines of unintelligible characters.

I reproduce them here in exact facsimile. I consider it important to publish these strange signs, for they led Professor Lidenbrock and his nephew to undertake the strangest expedition of the nineteenth century.



The Professor considered this series of characters for a few moments; then, raising his spectacles, he said:

‘These are Runic letters; they are absolutely identical with those in Snorro Turleson’s manuscript. But what on earth do they mean?’

Since Runic letters struck me as something invented by scholars to mystify the unfortunate world, was not sorry to see that my uncle could not make head or tail of them. At least that was what I supposed from his fingers, which had begun to twitch terribly.

‘And yet it must be old Icelandic!’ he muttered between his teeth. And Professor Lidenbrock must have known, for he was reputed to be a regular polyglot. Not that he could speak fluently all the two thousand languages and four thousand dialects used on this earth, but at least he was familiar with a good many of them.

Faced with this difficulty, he was obviously going to lose his temper, and I was steeling myself for a violent scene when the little clock on the mantelpiece struck two.

At that moment Martha opened the study door, saying:

‘The soup is ready.’

‘To hell with the soup,’ cried my uncle, ‘and her that made it, and them that drink it!’

Martha took to her heels. I ran after her and, scarcely knowing how I got there, I found myself sitting in my usual place in the dining-room.

I waited for a few minutes. There was no sign of the Professor. It was the first time, to my knowledge, that he had missed his dinner. And what a dinner it was! Parsley soup, a ham omelette seasoned with sorrel, veal with prune sauce, and, for dessert, sugared prawns, the whole accompanied by an excellent Moselle wine.

All this my uncle was going to miss on account of a scrap of old parchment! Naturally, as a devoted nephew, I considered it my duty to eat for him as well as for myself, and I carried out this duty conscientiously.

‘I’ve never known such a thing,’ said Martha. ‘Professor Lidenbrock not at table!’

‘Unbelievable, isn’t it?’

‘It means that something serious is going to happen!’ said the old servant, wagging her head.

In my opinion it meant nothing at all, except perhaps a dreadful scene when my uncle found that his dinner had been eaten.

I had come to my last prawn when a stentorian voice tore me away from the pleasures of dessert. With one bound I went from the dining-room to the study.



My Uncle is Baffled

‘It’s definitely Runic,’ said the Professor, frowning. ‘But there is a secret to it which I mean to discover, or else ...’

‘Sit down there,’ he added, extending his fist towards the table, ‘and get ready to write.’

In an instant I was ready.

‘Now, I am going to dictate to you the letters of our alphabet which correspond to these Icelandic characters. We shall see what that gives us. But by St Michael, be careful not to make a mistake!’

The dictation began, I was as careful as I could be. The letters were called out one after another, and together they formed this incomprehensible succession of words:

m̄.rnlls

esreuel

seecJde

sgtssmf

unteief

niedrke

kt,samn

atrateS

Saodrrn

emtnaeI

nuaect

rrilSa

Atvaar

.nscrc

ieaabs

ccdrmi

eeutul

frantu

dt,iac

oseibo

KediiY

When I had finished, my uncle snatched up the paper upon which I had been writing and examined it closely for a long time.

‘What does it mean?’ he kept repeating mechanically.

Upon my honour I could not have told him. In any case he was not asking me, and he went on talking to himself.

‘It’s what they call a cryptogram,’ he said, ‘in which the sense is concealed by a deliberate jumbling of the letters, which would make an intelligible sentence if they were correctly rearranged. To think that I may have here the clue to some great discovery!’

For my part I thought there was absolutely nothing there, but I prudently kept my opinion to myself.

Then the Professor took the book and the parchment, and compared them. ‘They aren’t in the same

handwriting,' he said. 'The cryptogram is of a later date than the book, and I can see indisputable proof of that right at the beginning. The first letter is a double *m*, a letter you would look for in vain in Turluson's book for it was only added to the Icelandic alphabet in the fourteenth century. So there are at least two hundred years between the book and the document.'

That, I admit, struck me as a logical conclusion.

'I am therefore led to think,' continued my uncle, 'that one of the owners of this book wrote these mysterious letters. But who the devil was that owner? Wouldn't he have written his name somewhere on this manuscript?'

My uncle raised his spectacles, picked up a powerful magnifying glass, and carefully examined the first pages of the book. On the back of the second page, the one bearing the subtitle, he noticed a sort of stain which looked like a blot of ink. However, looking at it closely, he made out a few half-obliterated letters. My uncle realized that this was the interesting point, and he laboured at the stain until, with the help of his magnifying glass, he ended up by distinguishing the following Runic characters, which he read out without hesitation:

1667 417664448

'Arne Saknussemm!' he cried triumphantly. 'Why that's a name, and what is more an Icelandic name, that of a famous alchemist of the sixteenth century!'

I looked at my uncle with a certain admiration. 'Those alchemists,' he went on, 'Avicenna, Bacon, Lully, Paracelsus, were the real scientists, indeed the only scientists, of their time. They made the most astonishing discoveries. Why shouldn't this Saknussemm have concealed some surprising invention behind this incomprehensible cryptogram? That must be it. That is it.'

The Professor's imagination took fire at this idea.

'No doubt,' I ventured to reply. 'But what interest could this scientist have had in hiding a wonderful discovery in this way?'

'What indeed? How should I know? Didn't Galileo do the same about Saturn? Anyway, we shall see: I'm going to discover the secret of this document, and I shall neither eat nor sleep until I have guessed it.'

'Oh!' I thought to myself.

'Nor will you, Axel,' he added.

'Good Lord!' I thought, 'it's a good thing I ate two dinners today!'

'First of all,' said my uncle, 'we must find the key to this cipher. That ought not to be difficult.'

At these words I looked up quickly. My uncle went on talking to himself.

'Nothing could be easier. In this document there are 132 letters, namely seventy-nine consonants and fifty-three vowels. This is roughly the proportion found in southern languages, while northern idioms are infinitely richer in consonants. Consequently this is written in a southern language.'

These conclusions struck me as very reasonable.

'But what language is it?'

Here I waited for a display of learning, but instead my uncle showed himself to be a master of analysis.

‘This Saknussem,’ he went on, ‘was an educated man, so when he was not writing in his mother tongue, he would naturally write in the language commonly used by educated men in the sixteenth century, namely Latin. If I am wrong, I can go on to try Spanish, French, Italian, Greek, and Hebrew. But the savants of the sixteenth century generally wrote in Latin, so that I am entitled to say, *a priori* that this is Latin.’

I sat up with a jolt. My memories of Latin rose in revolt at the idea that this string of barbarous words could belong to the sweet language of Virgil.

‘Yes, this is Latin,’ my uncle continued, ‘but Latin in a scrambled form.’

‘Well,’ I thought to myself, ‘if you can unscramble it, my dear uncle, you are a clever man.’

‘Let us have a good look at it,’ he said, picking up the sheet of paper on which I had written. ‘Here is a series of 132 letters in apparent disorder. There are some words consisting of consonants only, like the first, *mm.rnlls*; others, on the other hand, in which vowels predominate, such as the fifth, *unteief*, or the last but one, *oseibo*. Now this arrangement is obviously not deliberate: it has occurred mathematically in obedience to the unknown law which has governed the order of these letters. It seems to me quite certain that the original sentence was written in a regular manner, and afterwards distorted in accordance with a law which we have yet to discover. Whoever possessed the key to this cipher would be able to read it fluently. But what is that key? Axel, have you got it?’

To this question I made no reply, and for a very good reason. My eyes had fallen on a charming picture hanging on the wall, the portrait of Gräuben. My uncle’s ward was at Altona at that time, staying with one of her female relations, and her absence made me very sad, for, as I can now confess, the pretty Virlandaise and the Professor’s nephew loved each other with all the patience and tranquillity of the German character. We had become engaged, unknown to my uncle, who was too deeply absorbed in his geology to understand such feelings as ours. Gräuben was a lovely blue-eyed blonde, who was rather solemn and serious-minded but loved me none the less for that. For my part, I adored her, and so the picture of my little Virlandaise transferred me in a single instant from the world of realities to that of dreams and memories.

I recalled the faithful companion of my work and my pleasures. Every day she used to help me to arrange my uncle’s precious specimens; she and I labelled them together. Oh, Gräuben was an accomplished mineralogist; she could have taught a few things to many a savant. She loved getting to the bottom of abstruse scientific problems. What pleasant hours we had spent studying together, and how often I had envied the lot of those insensible stones which she handled with her charming fingers.

Then, when our recreation time came, we used to go out together, strolling along the shady walks of the Alster and going together to the old tarred windmill which looks so picturesque at the end of the lake. On the way we would chat together, hand in hand, and I would tell her stories which made her laugh. Eventually we would come to the banks of the Elbe, and, after saying good-bye to the swans gliding about among the big water-lilies, we would return to the quay by the steamer.

That was where I had got to in my dream when my uncle, thumping the table with his fist, brought me abruptly back to earth.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘the first idea which would occur to anybody wanting to mix up the letters in a sentence would be to write the words vertically instead of horizontally.’

‘It wouldn’t have occurred to me,’ I thought.

‘Now let’s see how that works. Axel, write down any sentence that comes into your head on this scrap of paper; only, instead of arranging the letters in the usual way, one after another, put them in vertical columns, so as to get five or six.’

I understood what he wanted and immediately wrote the following lines of letters:

| | | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>I</i> | <i>o</i> | <i>m</i> | <i>y</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>r</i> |
| <i>l</i> | <i>u</i> | <i>u</i> | <i>d</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>ä</i> |
| <i>o</i> | <i>v</i> | <i>c</i> | <i>e</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>u</i> |
| <i>v</i> | <i>e</i> | <i>h</i> | <i>a</i> | <i>l</i> | <i>b</i> |
| <i>e</i> | <i>r</i> | <i>,</i> | <i>r</i> | <i>e</i> | <i>e</i> |
| <i>y</i> | <i>y</i> | <i>m</i> | <i>l</i> | <i>G</i> | <i>n</i> |

‘Good!’ said the Professor, without reading what I had written. ‘Now set out these groups of letters in a horizontal line.’

I obeyed, and obtained the following result:

Iomyir luudtä ovcetü vehalb er,ree yymIGn

‘Splendid!’ said my uncle, snatching the paper out of my hands. ‘This already looks rather like the old document: the vowels and consonants are grouped in the same haphazard way, and there are even capitals and commas in the middle of words, just as there are in Saknussemm’s parchment!’

I couldn’t help thinking that what he said was extremely ingenious.

‘Now,’ my uncle went on, looking straight at me, ‘to read the sentence which you have just written and with which I am completely unfamiliar, all I need to do is to take the first letter of each word, the second letter, and so on.’

And my uncle, to his great surprise, and even more to mine, read out:

‘I love you very much, my dear little Gräuben.’

‘What’s this?’ said the Professor.

Yes, without knowing what I was doing, silly, lovesick young man that I was, I had written down that compromising sentence.

‘Ah! So you are in love with Gräuben?’ said my uncle, in a suitable voice for a guardian.

‘Yes! No!’ I stammered.

‘So you are in love with Gräuben,’ he repeated automatically. ‘Well, now let’s apply my method to the document in question.’

Returning to the consideration of his absorbing theory, my uncle had already forgotten my imprudent words. I say imprudent because the savant’s learned head was incapable of understanding matters of the heart. But luckily the important matter of the document carried the day.

As he got ready to carry out his crucial experiment, Professor Lidenbrock’s eyes darted flashes of light through his spectacles. His fingers trembled as he picked up the old parchment. He was deeply moved. At last he gave a loud cough, and in a solemn voice, reading out in succession the first letter each word, then the second, and so on, he dictated the following series to me:

m̄essunkaSenrA.icefdoK.segnittamurtn

ecertserrette,rotaivsadua,ednecsedsadne

lacartniiluJsiratracSarbmutablemek

meretarcsilucoYsleffenSnI

I must admit that when I came to the end I felt very excited; these letters, called out one after another, had conveyed no meaning to my mind, but I expected the Professor to pronounce a magnificent Latin sentence.

To my astonishment, a violent blow from his fist made the table rock on its legs. The ink spurted into the air, and the pen flew out of my hand.

‘That can’t be it!’ exclaimed my uncle. ‘It doesn’t make sense!’

Then, flying across the study like a cannonball, and descending the stairs like an avalanche, he rushed out into the Königstrasse and disappeared as fast as his legs could carry him.



I Find the Key

‘Has he gone?’ cried Martha, running out of her kitchen as the street door slammed shut, shaking the whole house.

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘well and truly gone!’

‘Well I never! And what about his dinner?’ asked the old servant.

‘He won’t have any.’

‘And his supper?’

‘He won’t have any.’

‘What?’ cried Martha, clasping her hands.

‘No, Martha, he’s not going to eat a thing, nor is anybody else in this house. Uncle Lidenbrock is going to starve us all until he has succeeded in deciphering an old scrawl which is absolutely indecipherable.’

‘Goodness gracious! You mean we shall have to starve to death?’

I did not dare to admit that, with a man as determined as my uncle, this fate struck me as inevitable.

The old servant, seriously alarmed, went back to her kitchen groaning to herself.

Once I was alone, the idea occurred to me of going to tell the whole story to Gräuben. But how could I leave the house? The Professor might return at any moment. And what if he called me? What if he wanted to go on with this logogryphic riddle which would have baffled even old Oedipus? And if I failed to answer his call, what might happen then?

The wisest thing to do was to remain where I was. As it happened, a mineralogist at Besançon had just sent us a collection of siliceous geodes which had to be classified. I set to work, sorting, labelling, and arranging in their own glass case all these hollow stones, each with a set of little crystals inside it.

But this task did not absorb the whole of my attention. The business of the old document continued to preoccupy me. My head was throbbing and I felt overcome by a vague anxiety. I had a presentiment of some imminent catastrophe.

After an hour’s work my geodes were all neatly arranged on their respective shelves. I then dropped into the old Utrecht armchair, my head thrown back and my arms dangling. I lit my long curved pipe whose bowl was carved in the shape of a reclining naiad, and then amused myself by watching the carbonizing process which was gradually turning my nymph into a negress. Every now and then I

pricked up my ears to hear whether anybody was coming upstairs. But no. Where could my uncle be at that moment? I imagined him running along beneath the splendid trees lining the Altona road, gesticulating wildly, dragging his stick along the wall, slashing at the grass, decapitating the thistles, and rousing the lonely storks from their sleep.

Would he return in triumph or in discouragement? Which of the two would get the upper hand, he or the secret? Asking myself these questions, I picked up the sheet of paper covered with the incomprehensible series of letters I had written down, and I murmured over and over again:

‘What can it possibly mean?’

I tried grouping these letters together to form words. It was impossible! Whether I put them together in twos, threes, fives, or sixes, the result was still unintelligible. It was no clearer when I noticed that the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth letters made the English word ‘ice’; that the eighty-fourth, eighty-fifth, and eighty-sixth made the word ‘sir’; and that in the body of the document in the second and third lines, there were the Latin words *rota*, *mutabile*, *ira*, *nec*, and *atra*.

‘Hang it,’ I thought, ‘these last words would seem to suggest that my uncle was right about the language the document is written in! And there in the fourth line I can see another Latin word – *luco*, which means a sacred wood. It’s true that in the third line there’s the word *tabiled*, which is as Hebrew as it could be, and in the last line the words *mer*, *arc*, and *mère*, which are pure French.’

All this was enough to drive a fellow mad. Four different languages in this ridiculous sentence. What connexion could there possibly be between the words *ice*, *sir*, *anger*, *cruel*, *sacred wood*, *changeable*, *mother*, *bow*, and *sea*? The first and last went together quite well: it was not at all surprising that in a document written in Iceland there should be mention of a sea of ice. But solving the rest of the cryptogram was quite another matter.

As I struggled with this apparently insoluble problem, my brain got heated, my eyes blinked at the sheet of paper, and the hundred and thirty-two letters seemed to flutter around me, like those silver drops which float in the air about you when you get a rush of blood to the head.

I was in the grip of a sort of hallucination; I was stifling; I needed air. Without thinking, I started fanning myself with the sheet of paper so that the back and front came alternately before my eyes.

Imagine my surprise when, in one of these rapid movements, just as the back was turning towards me, I thought I could see some perfectly legible words, Latin words, such as *craterem* and *terrestre*!

Light suddenly dawned upon me; these few clues were enough to give me a glimpse of the truth; I had found the key to the cipher. To understand the document, it was not even necessary to read it through the paper. It could be read out just as it was, just as it had been dictated to me. All the Professor’s ingenious theories were correct. He had been right about the arrangement of the letters, and right about the language in which the document was written. He had needed only a little ‘something’ extra in order to read the Latin sentence from beginning to end, and chance had just given me that ‘something’.

You may imagine how excited I was. My eyes misted over, so that I could not see. I had spread the sheet of paper out on the table, so that I only had to glance at it to possess its secret.

At last I succeeded in calming down. I forced myself to walk twice round the room in order to settle my nerves, and then dropped into the huge armchair.

‘Now let’s see what it says,’ I said to myself, after taking a deep breath.

I bent over the table and placed my finger on each letter in succession; and without stopping, without hesitating for a moment, I read out the whole sentence aloud.

But what terror and stupefaction it produced! At first I was absolutely thunderstruck. What! Had what I had just read really happened? Had some man had the audacity to penetrate ...?

‘Oh, no!’ I cried, leaping to my feet. ‘My uncle mustn’t know about this! It would be the last straw if he got to hear of a journey of this sort. He would want to follow suit, and nothing would stop him, he is such a fanatical geologist. He would set off in spite of everything, and he would take me with him, and we should never come back. Never! Never!’

I was in a state of indescribable agitation.

‘No, it shall not be,’ I declared, ‘and since it is in my power to prevent such an idea from entering my tyrant’s head, I shall do so. If he kept turning this document over and over, he too might discover the key. The only thing to do is to destroy it.’

There was a little fire still burning in the hearth. I picked up not only the sheet of paper but also Saknussemm’s parchment; and with a trembling hand I was about to fling them both into the fire and destroy the dangerous secret when the study door opened and my uncle appeared.



Hunger Defeats Me

I only just had time to put the wretched document back on the table.

Professor Lidenbrock seemed profoundly preoccupied. His all-absorbing idea was not giving him a moment's respite; he had obviously analysed the problem carefully and brought all the resources of his imagination to bear on it during his walk, and now he had come home to apply some new combination.

Sure enough, he sat down in his armchair and, pen in hand, started putting down what looked to me like algebraical equations.

I followed with my eyes his quivering hand, not missing a single movement. Was he going to produce some unexpected result? I trembled, but unnecessarily, for since the only true combination had been found, any other line of investigation was doomed to disappointment.

For three long hours my uncle worked without a word, without raising his head, rubbing out, beginning again, crossing out, and starting again hundreds of times.

I knew perfectly well that if he succeeded in arranging the letters in every possible relative order, the sentence would come out. But I also knew that a mere twenty letters can have 2,432,902,800,176,640,000 different combinations.

Now there were 132 letters in this sentence, and 132 letters produced a number of different combinations running to at least 133 figures, a number almost impossible to enumerate and quite impossible to imagine. I therefore felt sure that there was no danger of my uncle solving the problem by this heroic method.

Meanwhile time went by; night fell; the noises in the street ceased; my uncle, bent over his task, saw nothing, not even Martha opening the door; he heard nothing, not even the good woman's voice asking:

‘Are you going to have any supper tonight, Sir?’

So poor Martha had to go away unanswered. As for me, after resisting for a while I was overcome by an invincible drowsiness and I fell asleep on the sofa, while my uncle Lidenbrock went on calculating and rubbing out.

When I awoke the next morning, the indefatigable savant was still at work. His red eyes, his pale complexion, his hair tousled by his feverish hand, and his flushed cheeks revealed what a terrible

struggle he was having with the impossible, and what weariness of mind and intellectual turmoil he must have been enduring.

I honestly felt sorry for him. In spite of the reproaches I felt entitled to level at him, a certain pity took hold of me. The poor man was so possessed by his idea that he had forgotten to lose his temper. All his forces were concentrated on a single point, and, as their usual outlet was closed, there was every reason to fear an explosion at any moment.

With a single word I could have loosened the pressure of that iron vice which was squeezing his brain, but I said nothing.

Yet I was not a cruel fellow by nature. Why, then, did I remain silent in these circumstances? In my uncle's own best interests.

'No, no,' I said to myself, 'I will not speak! I know him – he would want to go, and nothing would stop him. He has a volcanic imagination, and he would risk his life to do something that no other geologist has done. I will remain silent. I will keep the secret which chance has revealed to me. To pass it on would be tantamount to killing Professor Lidenbrock. Let him find it out himself if he can. I have no desire to have his death on my conscience one day.'

Having taken this decision, I folded my arms and waited. But I had reckoned without a little incident which occurred a few hours later.

When Martha wanted to leave the house to go to the market, she found the door locked. The big key was gone. Who had taken it out of the lock? Obviously my uncle must have done so when he had come in the night before from his unexpected walk.

Had he done that on purpose? Or had it just been absent-mindedness on his part? Did he want to submit us to the rigours of hunger? That struck me as going rather too far. Could Martha and I really be the victims of a state of affairs which did not concern us in the slightest? We could indeed, for I remembered a precedent calculated to alarm us. A few years before, when my uncle was working on his great mineralogical classification, he had gone forty-eight hours without eating and the whole household had been obliged to share in that scientific fast. For my part, I had suffered stomach pains which had been anything but amusing for a lad with a healthy appetite.

Now it seemed to me that breakfast was going to fail to appear, like supper the night before. All the same, I decided to be a hero and not give in to the demands of hunger. Martha took the whole thing very much to heart and, poor woman, was greatly distressed. As for me, the impossibility of leaving the house distressed me even more, and for a very good reason, which you can imagine.

My uncle went on working, his imagination far away in the ideal world of combinations; he was living a long way from the earth and quite apart from earthly needs.

About midday, hunger began to have a serious effect on me. Martha, in all innocence, had eaten everything in the larder the night before, so that now there was nothing left in the house. Yet I stood firm. I made this a sort of point of honour.

Two o'clock struck. The situation was becoming ridiculous, indeed unbearable. I began to feel really hungry. I started telling myself that I was exaggerating the importance of the document; that my uncle would not believe it; that he would dismiss it as a joke; that if the worst came to the worst, he could be forcibly restrained; that finally he might find the key to the cipher himself, and in that case should have fasted in vain.

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