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opening extract from

Journey to the Centre of the Earth (with an introduction by Diana Wynne Jones)

written by

Jules Verne

published by

Puffin

Sample extract includes:

Introduction by Diana Wynne Jones

Contents

Extract from *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth*

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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.

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1
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 Johannaeum 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 Johannaeum 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 fits 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.

2

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!'

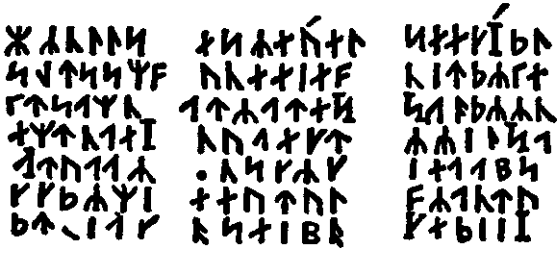
Not knowing what to say, I was going to prostrate myself before the book – a response which must give pleasure to gods as well as to kings, for it has the advantage of never causing them any embarrassment – when a little incident occurred which changed the course of the conversation. This was the appearance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