

Excerpts from “Journey to the Center of the Earth” by Jules Verne

Chapter 14: We Continue Our Descent

“Now, Harry,” cried the Professor, in an enthusiastic tone of voice, “we are truly about to take our first step into the interior of the earth, never before visited by man since the first creation of the world. You may consider, therefore, that at this precise moment our travels really commence.”

As my uncle made this remark, he took in one hand the Ruhmkorff coil apparatus which hung round his neck, and with the other he put the electric current into communication with the worm of the lantern. And a bright light at once illumined that dark and gloomy tunnel!

The effect was magical!

Hans, who carried the second apparatus, had it also put into operation. This ingenious application of electricity to practical purpose enabled us to move along by the light of an artificial day, amid even the flow of the most inflammable and combustible gases.

“Forward!” cried my uncle. Each took up his burden. Hans went first, my uncle followed, and I going third, we entered the somber gallery!

Just as we were to engulf ourselves in this dismal passage, I lifted up my head, and through the tube-like shaft saw that Iceland sky I was never to see again!

Was it the last I should ever see of any sky?

The stream of lava flowing from the bowels of the earth in 1219 had forced itself a passage through the tunnel. It lined the whole of the inside with its thick and brilliant coating. The electric light added very greatly to the brilliancy of the effect.

The great difficulty of our journey now began. How were we to prevent ourselves from slipping down the steeply inclined plane? Happily, some cracks, abrasures of the soil, and other irregularities, served the place of steps; and we descended slowly, allowing our heavy luggage to slip on before, at the end of a long cord.

But that which served as steps under our feet became in other places stalactites. The lava, very porous in certain places, took the form of little round blisters. Crystals of opaque quartz, adorned with limpid drops of natural glass suspended to the roof like lusters, seemed to take fire as we passed beneath them. One would have fancied that the genii of romance were illuminating their underground palaces to receive the sons of men.

“Magnificent, glorious!” I cried in a moment of involuntary enthusiasm, “what a spectacle, Uncle! Do you not admire these variegated shades of lava which run through a whole series of colors, from reddish-brown to pale yellow – by the most insensible degrees? And these crystals, they appear like luminous globes.”

“You are beginning to see the charms of travel, Master Harry,” cried my uncle. “Wait a bit, until we advance further. What we have as yet discovered is nothing – onwards, my boy, onwards!”

Chapter 23: Lost!

No words in any human language can describe my utter despair. I was literally buried alive, with no expectation but to die in all the slow, horrible torture of hunger and thirst.

I crawled about, feeling the dry and arid rock. How had I lost the course of the stream? Now I began to understand the strange silence which prevailed when I tried to listen for any sound from my companions.

It was now quite evident that I had unconsciously entered a different gallery. To what unknown depths had my companions gone? Where was I?

How to get back! Clue or landmark, there was absolutely none! My feet left no signs on the granite and shingle. My brain throbbed as I tried to solve this terrible problem. My situation had finally to be summed up in three awful words:

Lost! Lost! LOST!!!

Lost at a depth which seemed to be immeasurable.

I tried to bring my thoughts back to the things of the world so long forgotten: Hamburg, the house on the Königstrasse, my dear cousin Gretchen. There they were before me, but how unreal!

Then I saw all the incidents of our journey pass before me. I said to myself that if I retained the most shadowy outline of a hope, it must surely be a sign of approaching delirium. Who could help me to find my road, and regain my companions?

It was folly and madness to entertain even a shadow of hope!

“Oh, Uncle!” was my despairing cry.

At last I began to resign myself to the fact that no further aid was to be expected from man. Knowing that I was powerless to do anything for my own salvation, I prayed earnestly and sincerely.

This renewal of my youthful faith brought about a great calm, and I was able to concentrate all my strength and intelligence on the terrible realities of my situation.

I had three days’ provisions. Moreover, my water bottle was quite full. Nevertheless, it was impossible to remain alone. I must try to find my companions at any price. Doubtless I was right to retrace my steps in an upward direction.

By doing this with care and coolness, I must reach the point where I had turned away from the rippling stream. Once at this spot, once the river was at my feet, I could regain the awful crater of Mount Sneffels.

After a slight meal and drink of water, I rose refreshed. Leaning heavily on my pole, I began the ascent of the gallery. The slope was very rapid, but I advanced hopefully and carefully.

During one whole hour nothing happened to check my progress. As I advanced I tried to recall the shape of the tunnel to persuade myself that I had followed this winding route before. But no one particular sign could I remember. I was soon forced to admit that this gallery would never take me back to the point at which I had separated from my companions. It was absolutely without an opening – a mere blind alley in the earth.

The moment at length came when, facing the solid rock, I knew my fate. The courage which had sustained me drooped before the sight of this pitiless granite rock! All that remained for me was to lie down and die. To lie down and die was the most cruel of deaths!

In the midst of all this anguish and despair, a new horror befell me. My lamp, by falling down, had got out of order. I had no means of repairing it. Its light was already becoming paler and paler, and would soon expire.

With a strange sense of resignation and despair, I watched a procession of shadows flash along the granite wall. I scarcely dared to lower my eyelids, fearing to lose the last spark of this fugitive light. Every instant it seemed to me that it was about to vanish and to leave me forever – in utter darkness!

At last, one final trembling flame remained in the lamp. I followed it with all my power of vision. I gasped for breath. I concentrated upon it all the power of my soul, as if this was the last light I was ever destined to see.

A wild cry escaped my lips. On earth light is never completely extinguished. It permeates everywhere, and whatever little may remain, the retina of the eye will succeed in finding it. In this place nothing – not the faintest ray of light.

I was now wholly lost. I knew not what I did. I began to run, always screaming, roaring, howling, falling and picking myself up all covered with blood.

Where was I going? It was impossible to say. I was perfectly ignorant of the matter.

After a long time, having utterly exhausted my strength, I fell along the side of the tunnel and lost all consciousness of existence!