

CHAPTER 37

THE MYSTERIOUS DAGGER

During this time, we had left the bright and transparent forest far behind us. We were mute with astonishment, overcome by a kind of feeling which was next door to apathy. We kept running in spite of ourselves. It was a perfect Right, which resembled one of those horrible sensations we sometimes meet with in our dreams.

Instinctively we made our way towards the Central Sea, and I cannot now tell what wild thoughts passed through my mind, nor of what follies I might have been guilty, but for a very serious preoccupation which brought me back to practical life.

Though I was aware that we were treading on a soil quite new to us, I, however, every now and then noticed certain aggregations of rock, the shape of which forcibly reminded me of those near Port Gretchen.

This confirmed, moreover, the indications of the compass and our extraordinary and unlooked-for, as well as involuntary, return to the north of this great Central Sea. It was so like our starting point, that I could scarcely doubt the reality of our position. Streams and cascades fell in hundreds over the numerous projections of the rocks.

I actually thought I could see our faithful and monotonous Hans and the wonderful grotto in which I had come back to life after my tremendous fall.

Then, as we advanced still farther, the position of the cliffs, the appearance of a stream, the unexpected profile of a rock, threw me again into a state of bewildering doubt.

After some time, I explained my state of mental indecision to my uncle. He confessed to a similar feeling of hesitation. He was totally unable to make up his mind in the midst of this extraordinary but uniform panorama.

"There can be no doubt," I insisted, "that we have not landed exactly at the place whence we first took our departure; but the tempest has brought us above our starting point. I think, therefore, that if we follow the coast we shall once more find Port Gretchen."

"In that case," cried my uncle, "it is useless to continue our exploration. The very best thing we can do is to make our way back to the raft. Are you quite sure, Harry, that you are not mistaken?"

"It is difficult," was my reply, "to come to any decision, for all these rocks are exactly alike. There is no marked difference between them. At the same time, the impression on my mind is that I recognize the promontory at the foot of which our worthy Hans constructed the raft. We

are, I am nearly convinced, near the little port: if this be not it," I added, carefully examining a creek which appeared singularly familiar to my mind.

"My dear Harry--if this were the case, we should find traces of our own footsteps, some signs of our passage; and I can really see nothing to indicate our having passed this way."

"But I see something," I cried, in an impetuous tone of voice, as I rushed forward and eagerly picked up something which shone in the sand under my feet.

"What is it?" cried the astonished and bewildered Professor.

"This," was my reply.

And I handed to my startled relative a rusty dagger, of singular shape.

"What made you bring with you so useless a weapon?" he exclaimed. "It was needlessly hampering yourself."

"I bring it? It is quite new to me. I never saw it before--are you sure it is not out of your collection?"

"Not that I know of," said the Professor, puzzled. "I have no recollection of the circumstance. It was never my property."

"This is very extraordinary," I said, musing over the novel and singular incident.

"Not at all. There is a very simple explanation, Harry. The Icelanders are known to keep up the use of these antiquated weapons, and this must have belonged to Hans, who has let it fall without knowing it."

I shook my head. That dagger had never been in the possession of the pacific and taciturn Hans. I knew him and his habits too well.

"Then what can it be--unless it be the weapon of some antediluvian warrior," I continued, "of some living man, a contemporary of that mighty shepherd from whom we have just escaped? But no--mystery upon mystery--this is no weapon of the stony epoch, nor even of the bronze period. It is made of excellent steel--"

Ere I could finish my sentence, my uncle stopped me short from entering upon a whole train of theories, and spoke in his most cold and decided tone of voice.

"Calm yourself, my dear boy, and endeavor to use your reason. This weapon, upon which we have fallen so unexpectedly, is a true *dague*, one of those worn by gentlemen in their belts during the sixteenth century. Its use was to give the *coup de grace*, the final blow, to the foe who would not surrender. It is clearly of Spanish workmanship. It

belongs neither to you, nor to me, nor the eider-down hunter, nor to any of the living beings who may still exist so marvelously in the interior of the earth."

"What can you mean, Uncle?" I said, now lost in a host of surmises.

"Look closely at it," he continued; "these jagged edges were never made by the resistance of human blood and bone. The blade is covered with a regular coating of iron mold and rust, which is not a day old, not a year old, not a century old, but much more--"

The Professor began to get quite excited, according to custom, and was allowing himself to be carried away by his fertile imagination. I could have said something. He stopped me.

"Harry," he cried, "we are now on the verge of a great discovery. This blade of a dagger you have so marvelously discovered, after being abandoned upon the sand for more than a hundred, two hundred, even three hundred years, has been indented by someone endeavoring to carve an inscription on these rocks."

"But this poniard never got here of itself," I exclaimed, "it could not have twisted itself. Someone, therefore, must have preceded us upon the shores of this extraordinary sea."

"Yes, a man."

"But what man has been sufficiently desperate to do such a thing?"

"A man who has somewhere written his name with this very dagger--a man who has endeavored once more to indicate the right road to the interior of the earth. Let us look around, my boy. You know not the importance of your singular and happy discovery."

Prodigiously interested, we walked along the wall of rock, examining the smallest fissures, which might finally expand into the much wished--for gully or shaft.

We at last reached a spot where the shore became extremely narrow. The sea almost bathed the foot of the rocks, which were here very lofty and steep. There was scarcely a path wider than two yards at any point. At last, under a huge over-hanging rock, we discovered the entrance of a dark and gloomy tunnel.

There, on a square tablet of granite, which had been smoothed by rubbing it with another stone, we could see two mysterious, and much worn letters, the two initials of the bold and extraordinary traveler who had preceded us on our adventurous journey.

[Illustration: Runic Glyph]

"A. S.!" cried my uncle. "You see, I was right. Arne Saknussemm, always

Arne Saknussemm!"