

# **Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea**

by

Jules Verne

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## Introduction

"The deepest parts of the ocean are totally unknown to us," admits Professor Aronnax early in this novel. "What goes on in those distant depths? What creatures inhabit, or could inhabit, those regions twelve or fifteen miles beneath the surface of the water? It's almost beyond conjecture."

Jules Verne (1828-1905) published the French equivalent of these words in 1869, and little has changed since. 126 years later, a Time cover story on deep-sea exploration made much the same admission: "We know more about Mars than we know about the oceans." This reality begins to explain the dark power and otherworldly fascination of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*.

Born in the French river town of Nantes, Verne had a lifelong passion for the sea. First as a Paris stockbroker, later as a celebrated author and yachtsman, he went on frequent voyages-- to Britain, America, the Mediterranean. But the specific stimulus for this novel was an 1865 fan letter from a fellow writer, Madame George Sand. She praised Verne's two early novels *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1863) and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), then added: "Soon I hope you'll take us into the ocean depths, your characters traveling in diving equipment perfected by your science and your imagination." Thus inspired, Verne created one of literature's great rebels, a freedom fighter who plunged beneath the waves to wage a unique form of guerilla warfare.

Initially, Verne's narrative was influenced by the 1863 uprising of Poland against Tsarist Russia. The Poles were quashed with a violence that appalled not only Verne but all Europe. As originally conceived, Verne's Captain Nemo was a Polish nobleman whose entire family had been slaughtered by Russian troops. Nemo builds a fabulous futuristic submarine, the *Nautilus*, then conducts an underwater campaign of vengeance against his imperialist oppressor.

But in the 1860s France had to treat the Tsar as an ally, and Verne's publisher Pierre Hetzel pronounced the book unprintable. Verne reworked its political content, devising new nationalities for Nemo and his great enemy--information revealed only in a later novel, *The Mysterious Island* (1875); in the present work Nemo's background remains a dark secret. In all, the novel had a difficult gestation. Verne and Hetzel were in constant conflict and the book went through multiple drafts, struggles reflected in its several working titles over the period 1865-69: early on, it was variously called *Voyage Under the Waters*, *Twenty-five Thousand Leagues Under the Waters*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Waters*, and *A Thousand Leagues Under the Oceans*.

Verne is often dubbed, in Isaac Asimov's phrase, "the world's first science-fiction writer." And it's true, many of his sixty-odd books do anticipate future events and technologies: *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *Hector Servadac* (1877) deal in space travel, while *Journey to the Center of the Earth* features travel to the earth's core. But with Verne

the operative word is "travel," and some of his best-known titles don't really qualify as sci-fi: *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872) and *Michael Strogoff* (1876) are closer to "travelogs"-- adventure yarns in far-away places.

These observations partly apply here. The subtitle of the present book is *An Underwater Tour of the World*, so in good travelog style, the *Nautilus's* exploits supply an episodic story line. Shark attacks, giant squid, cannibals, hurricanes, whale hunts, and other rip-roaring adventures erupt almost at random. Yet this loose structure gives the novel an air of documentary realism. What's more, Verne adds backbone to the action by developing three recurring motifs: the deepening mystery of Nemo's past life and future intentions, the mounting tension between Nemo and hot-tempered harpooner Ned Land, and Ned's ongoing schemes to escape from the *Nautilus*. These unifying threads tighten the narrative and accelerate its momentum.

Other subtleties occur inside each episode, the textures sparkling with wit, information, and insight. Verne regards the sea from many angles: in the domain of marine biology, he gives us thumbnail sketches of fish, seashells, coral, sometimes in great catalogs that swirl past like musical cascades; in the realm of geology, he studies volcanoes literally inside and out; in the world of commerce, he celebrates the high-energy entrepreneurs who lay the Atlantic Cable or dig the Suez Canal. And Verne's marine engineering proves especially authoritative. His specifications for an open-sea submarine and a self-contained diving suit were decades before their time, yet modern technology bears them out triumphantly.

True, today's scientists know a few things he didn't: the South Pole isn't at the water's edge but far inland; sharks don't flip over before attacking; giant squid sport ten tentacles not eight; sperm whales don't prey on their whalebone cousins. This notwithstanding, Verne furnishes the most evocative portrayal of the ocean depths before the arrival of Jacques Cousteau and technicolor film.

Lastly the book has stature as a novel of character. Even the supporting cast is shrewdly drawn: Professor Aronnax, the career scientist caught in an ethical conflict; Conseil, the compulsive classifier who supplies humorous tag lines for Verne's fast facts; the harpooner Ned Land, a creature of constant appetites, man as heroic animal.

But much of the novel's brooding power comes from Captain Nemo. Inventor, musician, Renaissance genius, he's a trail-blazing creation, the prototype not only for countless renegade scientists in popular fiction, but even for such varied figures as Sherlock Holmes or Wolf Larsen. However, Verne gives his hero's brilliance and benevolence a dark underside--the man's obsessive hate for his old enemy. This compulsion leads Nemo into ugly contradictions: he's a fighter for freedom, yet all who board his ship are imprisoned there for good; he works to save lives, both human and animal, yet he himself creates a holocaust; he detests imperialism, yet he lays personal claim to the South Pole. And in this last action he falls into the classic sin of Pride. He's swiftly punished. The *Nautilus* nearly perishes in the Antarctic and Nemo sinks into a growing depression.

Like Shakespeare's King Lear he courts death and madness in a great storm, then commits mass murder, collapses in catatonic paralysis, and suicidally runs his ship into the ocean's most dangerous whirlpool. Hate swallows him whole.

For many, then, this book has been a source of fascination, surely one of the most influential novels ever written, an inspiration for such scientists and discoverers as engineer Simon Lake, oceanographer William Beebe, polar traveler Sir Ernest Shackleton. Likewise Dr. Robert D. Ballard, finder of the sunken Titanic, confesses that this was his favorite book as a teenager, and Cousteau himself, most renowned of marine explorers, called it his shipboard bible.

The present translation is a faithful yet communicative rendering of the original French texts published in Paris by J. Hetzel et Cie.-- the hardcover first edition issued in the autumn of 1871, collated with the softcover editions of the First and Second Parts issued separately in the autumn of 1869 and the summer of 1870. Although prior English versions have often been heavily abridged, this new translation is complete to the smallest substantive detail.

Because, as that Time cover story suggests, we still haven't caught up with Verne. Even in our era of satellite dishes and video games, the seas keep their secrets. We've seen progress in sonar, torpedoes, and other belligerent machinery, but sailors and scientists--to say nothing of tourists--have yet to voyage in a submarine with the luxury and efficiency of the Nautilus.

F. P. WALTER

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### **Units of Measure**

CABLE LENGTH In Verne's context, 600 feet

CENTIGRADE 0 degrees centigrade = freezing water

37 degrees centigrade = human body temperature

100 degrees centigrade = boiling water

FATHOM 6 feet

GRAM Roughly 1/28 of an ounce

- MILLIGRAM Roughly 1/28,000 of an ounce

- KILOGRAM (KILO) Roughly 2.2 pounds

HECTARE Roughly 2.5 acres

KNOT 1.15 miles per hour

LEAGUE In Verne's context, 2.16 miles

LITER Roughly 1 quart

METER Roughly 1 yard, 3 inches

- MILLIMETER Roughly  $\frac{1}{25}$  of an inch

- CENTIMETER Roughly  $\frac{2}{5}$  of an inch

- DECIMETER Roughly 4 inches

- KILOMETER Roughly  $\frac{6}{10}$  of a mile

- MYRIAMETER Roughly 6.2 miles

TON, METRIC Roughly 2,200 pounds viii

## PART I

### A Runaway Reef

THE YEAR 1866 was marked by a bizarre development, an unexplained and downright inexplicable phenomenon that surely no one has forgotten. Without getting into those rumors that upset civilians in the seaports and deranged the public mind even far inland, it must be said that professional seamen were especially alarmed. Traders, shipowners, captains of vessels, skippers, and master mariners from Europe and America, naval officers from every country, and at their heels the various national governments on these two continents, were all extremely disturbed by the business.

In essence, over a period of time several ships had encountered "an enormous thing" at sea, a long spindle-shaped object, sometimes giving off a phosphorescent glow, infinitely bigger and faster than any whale.

The relevant data on this apparition, as recorded in various logbooks, agreed pretty closely as to the structure of the object or creature in question, its unprecedented speed of movement, its startling locomotive power, and the unique vitality with which it seemed to be gifted. If it was a cetacean, it exceeded in bulk any whale previously classified by science. No naturalist, neither Cuvier nor Lacépède, neither Professor Dumeril nor Professor de Quatrefages, would have accepted the existence of such a monster sight unseen-- specifically, unseen by their own scientific eyes.

Striking an average of observations taken at different times-- rejecting those timid estimates that gave the object a length of 200 feet, and ignoring those exaggerated views that saw it as a mile wide and three long--you could still assert that this phenomenal creature greatly exceeded the dimensions of anything then known to ichthyologists, if it existed at all.

Now then, it did exist, this was an undeniable fact; and since the human mind dotes on objects of wonder, you can understand the worldwide excitement caused by this unearthly apparition. As for relegating it to the realm of fiction, that charge had to be dropped.

In essence, on July 20, 1866, the steamer Governor Higginson, from the Calcutta & Burnach Steam Navigation Co., encountered this moving mass five miles off the eastern shores of Australia.

Captain Baker at first thought he was in the presence of an unknown reef; he was even about to fix its exact position when two waterspouts shot out of this inexplicable object and sprang hissing into the air some 150 feet. So, unless this reef was subject to the intermittent eruptions of a geyser, the Governor Higginson had fair and honest dealings

with some aquatic mammal, until then unknown, that could spurt from its blowholes waterspouts mixed with air and steam.

Similar events were likewise observed in Pacific seas, on July 23 of the same year, by the Christopher Columbus from the West India & Pacific Steam Navigation Co. Consequently, this extraordinary cetacean could transfer itself from one locality to another with startling swiftness, since within an interval of just three days, the Governor Higginson and the Christopher Columbus had observed it at two positions on the charts separated by a distance of more than 700 nautical leagues.

Fifteen days later and 2,000 leagues farther, the Helvetia from the Compagnie Nationale and the Shannon from the Royal Mail line, running on opposite tacks in that part of the Atlantic lying between the United States and Europe, respectively signaled each other that the monster had been sighted in latitude 42 degrees 15' north and longitude 60 degrees 35' west of the meridian of Greenwich. From their simultaneous observations, they were able to estimate the mammal's minimum length at more than 350 English feet; this was because both the Shannon and the Helvetia were of smaller dimensions, although each measured 100 meters stem to stern. Now then, the biggest whales, those rorqual whales that frequent the waterways of the Aleutian Islands, have never exceeded a length of 56 meters--if they reach even that.

One after another, reports arrived that would profoundly affect public opinion: new observations taken by the transatlantic liner Pereire, the Inman line's Etna running afoul of the monster, an official report drawn up by officers on the French frigate Normandy, dead-earnest reckonings obtained by the general staff of Commodore Fitz-James aboard the Lord Clyde. In lighthearted countries, people joked about this phenomenon, but such serious, practical countries as England, America, and Germany were deeply concerned.

In every big city the monster was the latest rage; they sang about it in the coffee houses, they ridiculed it in the newspapers, they dramatized it in the theaters. The tabloids found it a fine opportunity for hatching all sorts of hoaxes. In those newspapers short of copy, you saw the reappearance of every gigantic imaginary creature, from "Moby Dick," that dreadful white whale from the High Arctic regions, to the stupendous kraken whose tentacles could entwine a 500-ton craft and drag it into the ocean depths. They even reprinted reports from ancient times: the views of Aristotle and Pliny accepting the existence of such monsters, then the Norwegian stories of Bishop Pontoppidan, the narratives of Paul Egede, and finally the reports of Captain Harrington-- whose good faith is above suspicion--in which he claims he saw, while aboard the Castilian in 1857, one of those enormous serpents that, until then, had frequented only the seas of France's old extremist newspaper, The Constitutionalist.

An interminable debate then broke out between believers and skeptics in the scholarly societies and scientific journals. The "monster question" inflamed all minds. During this memorable campaign, journalists making a profession of science battled with those making a profession of wit, spilling waves of ink and some of them even two or three drops of blood, since they went from sea serpents to the most offensive personal remarks.

For six months the war seesawed. With inexhaustible zest, the popular press took potshots at feature articles from the Geographic Institute of Brazil, the Royal Academy of Science in Berlin, the British Association, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., at discussions in *The Indian Archipelago*, in *Cosmos* published by Father Moigno, in Petermann's *Mittheilungen*,\* and at scientific chronicles in the great French and foreign newspapers. When the monster's detractors cited a saying by the botanist Linnaeus that "nature doesn't make leaps," witty writers in the popular periodicals parodied it, maintaining in essence that "nature doesn't make lunatics," and ordering their contemporaries never to give the lie to nature by believing in krakens, sea serpents, "Moby Dicks," and other all-out efforts from drunken seamen. Finally, in a much-feared satirical journal, an article by its most popular columnist finished off the monster for good, spurning it in the style of Hippolytus repulsing the amorous advances of his stepmother Phaedra, and giving the creature its quietus amid a universal burst of laughter. Wit had defeated science.

During the first months of the year 1867, the question seemed to be buried, and it didn't seem due for resurrection, when new facts were brought to the public's attention. But now it was no longer an issue of a scientific problem to be solved, but a quite real and serious danger to be avoided. The question took an entirely new turn. The monster again became an islet, rock, or reef, but a runaway reef, unfixed and elusive.

On March 5, 1867, the Moravian from the Montreal Ocean Co., lying during the night in latitude 27 degrees 30' and longitude 72 degrees 15', ran its starboard quarter afoul of a rock marked on no charts of these waterways. Under the combined efforts of wind and 400-horsepower steam, it was traveling at a speed of thirteen knots. Without the high quality of its hull, the Moravian would surely have split open from this collision and gone down together with those 237 passengers it was bringing back from Canada.

This accident happened around five o'clock in the morning, just as day was beginning to break. The officers on watch rushed to the craft's stern. They examined the ocean with the most scrupulous care. They saw nothing except a strong eddy breaking three cable lengths out, as if those sheets of water had been violently churned. The site's exact bearings were taken, and the Moravian continued on course apparently undamaged. Had it run afoul of an underwater rock or the wreckage of some enormous derelict ship? They were unable to say. But when they examined its undersides in the service yard, they discovered that part of its keel had been smashed.

This occurrence, extremely serious in itself, might perhaps have been forgotten like so many others, if three weeks later it hadn't been reenacted under identical conditions. Only, thanks to the nationality of the ship victimized by this new ramming, and thanks to the reputation of the company to which this ship belonged, the event caused an immense uproar.

No one is unaware of the name of that famous English shipowner, Cunard. In 1840 this shrewd industrialist founded a postal service between Liverpool and Halifax, featuring three wooden ships with 400-horsepower paddle wheels and a burden of 1,162 metric

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