

The Original Jules Verne Novel

Verne fathered science fiction and "20,000 Leagues" is his masterpiece.

One of the 19th Century's most prolific and talented artists, Jules Verne, wrote about exotic lands and daring, dangerous adventures—all without ever leaving his native country.

Born in Nantes, France in 1828, Verne came from a legal and seafaring family. After studying law in Paris, he turned his attention to literary and theatrical activities, gaining some distinction with comedies and librettos for comic operas. His keen interest in ballooning and in geographic exploration prompted him to write a lengthy treatise on a possible aerial voyage across the then unexplored continent of Africa. The highly technical and academic paper was rejected several times before one publisher, Pierre Jules Hetzel, urged the author to rewrite it as a fanciful tale of adventure.

The result, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, revealed to Verne the true direction of his talent—the delineation of incredible adventures based so firmly on scientific and geographic fact that they seemed entirely plausible. *Five Weeks in a Balloon* was first published in serial form (as were most of Verne's stories) in Hetzel's periodical for juveniles, *Magazin d' Education*, in 1826.

An immediate success, it was issued in book form the following year, bringing national acclaim to Verne and considerable wealth to Hetzel, who gave the 35-year-old author a lifelong contract. Thereafter, Verne wrote one or two books every year for the next quarter of a century, receiving an annual sum of 20,000 francs for his endeavors.

When the author died at the age of 77 in 1905, Verne had written 63 novels, in addition to scores of short stories, plays and essays. Among his popular works are: *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869), and *Around the World in 80 Days* (1872).

In his preparation for *20,000 Leagues*, his greatest work, the author proved himself to be a meticulous researcher. He spent the greater part of 1866 collecting scientific and technical information and interviewing oceanographers, marine biologists, fishermen, sailors—in short, those people who had knowledge of the sea and all its aspects.

His conception of the submarine *Nautilus* (a Latin word, meaning "sailor") was based on the latest technological innovations in

marine construction and engineering. In addition to gathering a wealth of both factual and speculative material, the author also made an exhaustive study of the lives of all the inventors who had ever attempted to build a submarine. The basic plans for his fictional submarine were based largely on the work of

these men.

The major sections of *20,000 Leagues* were actually written at sea, aboard Verne's sailing yacht, the *Saint Michel*, through which he acquired firsthand knowledge of the ocean's ever-changing moods. It took the author more than two years to complete his carefully thought-out story.

In January, 1870, *20,000 Leagues* appeared in Paris bookstalls and became an immediate best seller. Several years later, the novel, along with its author, received worldwide recognition when it was translated into a number of different languages, including English.

The chief "character" of Verne's opus, the *Nautilus*, was a remarkable creation. When the novel was published, there was no practical ocean-going submarine; experimental models still lacked a suitable means of propulsion. However, Verne's submersible was equipped with electric propulsion machinery. Unlike its real contemporaries, the *Nautilus* was able to travel at a tremendous speed across all the oceans of the world and could remain underwater for an indefinite period of time. With marvelous vision, Verne foretold such developments as double-hull construction, diving chambers, oxygen tanks, electric measuring devices and air conditioning. Surprisingly, he did not envision torpedoes or the periscope.

Besides showing uncanny brilliance in the technical aspects of his novel, Verne also created some intriguing human characters. No creature of science fiction has been so enigmatic as Verne's central character in *20,000 Leagues*—a misanthrope who simply calls himself Nemo (a Latin word, meaning "without name"). And about no other character have so many questions been asked. Who is Nemo? What is his nationality?

To find the answers one must go back to Verne's original idea for the book, which can be capsulized as follows: a Polish aristocrat, whose country has been invaded by Czarist Russia and whose family has been murdered by the aggressor, flees his native land and creates a world of his own in the depths of the sea. Traveling the seven seas in a submarine craft of his own invention, he sinks Russian warships wherever he finds them.

An advocate of revolutionary principles, Verne was outraged



The cover of Hetzel's first edition.

over Russia's relentless repression of the Poles after their insurrection against Czar Alexander II in 1863. The author passionately believed that all revolutionary actions were moral. He wanted the character of Nemo to be a symbol of revolt against Russian tyranny.

This idea, however, alarmed Hetzel, whose concern was more than valid. France was having good diplomatic relations with Russia and her allies. To reveal Nemo as a Pole fighting the Russians would have caused a strain in international relations.

Verne decided to modify Nemo's character, making him an unidentified figure who fought society as a whole. The submarine, initially a weapon of offense, became a mechanism of defense. Its commander never destroyed ships without justification.

After *20,000 Leagues* appeared in print, Verne received hundreds of letters from their readers who asked that Nemo's background be revealed in a sequel. In 1871, Verne wrote *Mysterious Island*, devoting one chapter to his famous character's origin.

Under pressure from Hetzel, who still thought it wise not to reveal Nemo as a Pole, the author made his character a refugee Indian prince named Dakkar, the son of a rajah. He revealed the enemy to be the British Empire, whose troops had massacred Dakkar's entire family during the colonial wars.

Why the British? Verne and every thinking man in France—all sons of the French revolution—despised England's imperialistic expansion over other races of mankind. At the time, England appeared to be the safest choice to play the "villain."

For his masterpiece, Verne created one of the world's great fictional characters. Nemo is not only a creature of Verne's times but our times as well. He still remains a symbol of individual liberty.



Illustrations from Hetzel's first edition of Verne's book showing the attack of the giant squid (top), the Salon of the Nautilus (middle) and a burial party at sea (bottom).