

# JULES VERNE

## The Biography

William Butcher

Foreword by  
Arthur C. Clarke



*Jules Verne - The Biography*

WILLIAM BUTCHER



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Publisher in  
writing.

How many things dismissed out of hand  
yesterday turn out to be true tomorrow?

JULES VERNE,  
*From the Earth to the Moon*  
(ch. 18)



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## *Reactions to Jules Verne*

“Verne gave us the earth and the moon. Now Butcher gives us the real Verne”, Ray Bradbury, author of *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian Chronicles*

“Radiates fascination”, *Booklist*

“Gorgeously written and full of valuable new detail”, Frederick Paul Walter

“The best modern biography of Verne”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

“Far surpass[es] previous efforts”, Prof. Arthur B. Evans

“A fascinating portrait of a flesh-and-blood human being”, Volker Dehs

“The most documented, detailed, and accurate biography”, Count Piero Gondolo della Riva

“A superb [research] tool”, Jean-Michel Margot

“A *tour de force* of scholarly investigation”, David Coward

“Quite spectacular”, Michael Crichton, author of *Jurassic Park*

## ABBREVIATIONS

- ADF: Marguerite Allotte de la Fuyë, *Jules Verne*  
JES: Verne, *Journey to England and Scotland*  
BSJV: *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne*  
CNM: Charles-Noël Martin, *La Vie et l'œuvre de Jules Verne* (*The Life and Works of Jules Verne*)  
Int.: *Entretiens avec Jules Verne* (*Interviews*)  
JD: Joëlle Dusseau, *Jules Verne*  
JJV: Jean Jules-Verne, *Jules Verne*  
JVEST: Jean-Michel Margot (ed.), *Jules Verne en son temps* (*Jules Verne in his Time*)  
Lemire: Charles Lemire, *Jules Verne*  
MCY: “Memories of Childhood and Youth”  
OD: Olivier Dumas, *Voyage à travers Jules Verne* (*Journey through Jules Verne*)  
*Poems*: *Poésies inédites* (*Unpublished Poems*)  
PV: Philippe Valetoux, *Jules Verne: En mer et contre tous* (*Jules Verne: All at odds and sea*)  
RBA : *Revue des beaux-arts* (a review devoted to the fine arts)  
RD: Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve, *Jules Verne: Souvenirs personnels* (using the page numbers of the typescript)  
St M.: Verne’s list of journeys on the *St Michel II* and *III*  
TI: *Théâtre inédit* (*Unpublished Plays*)



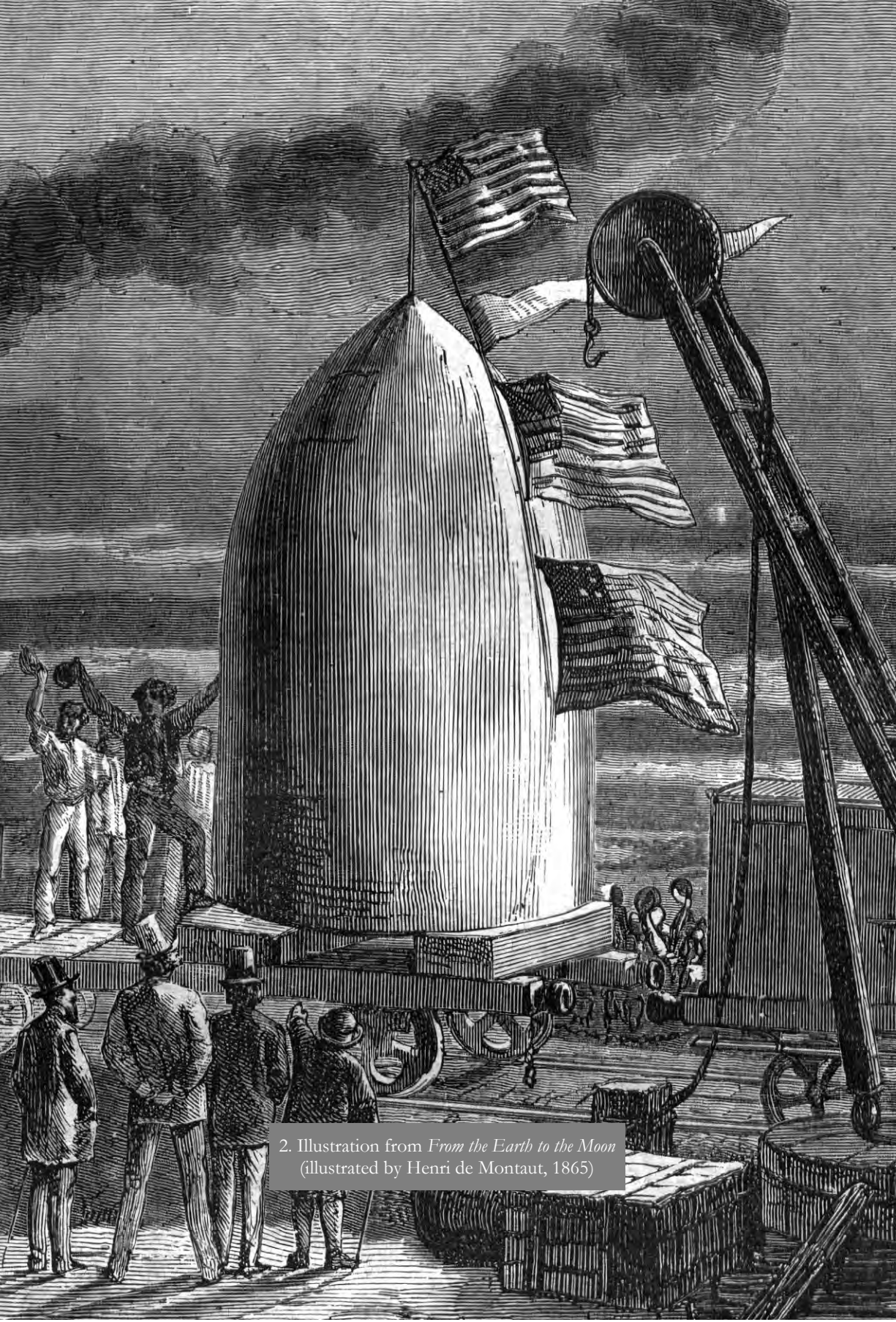
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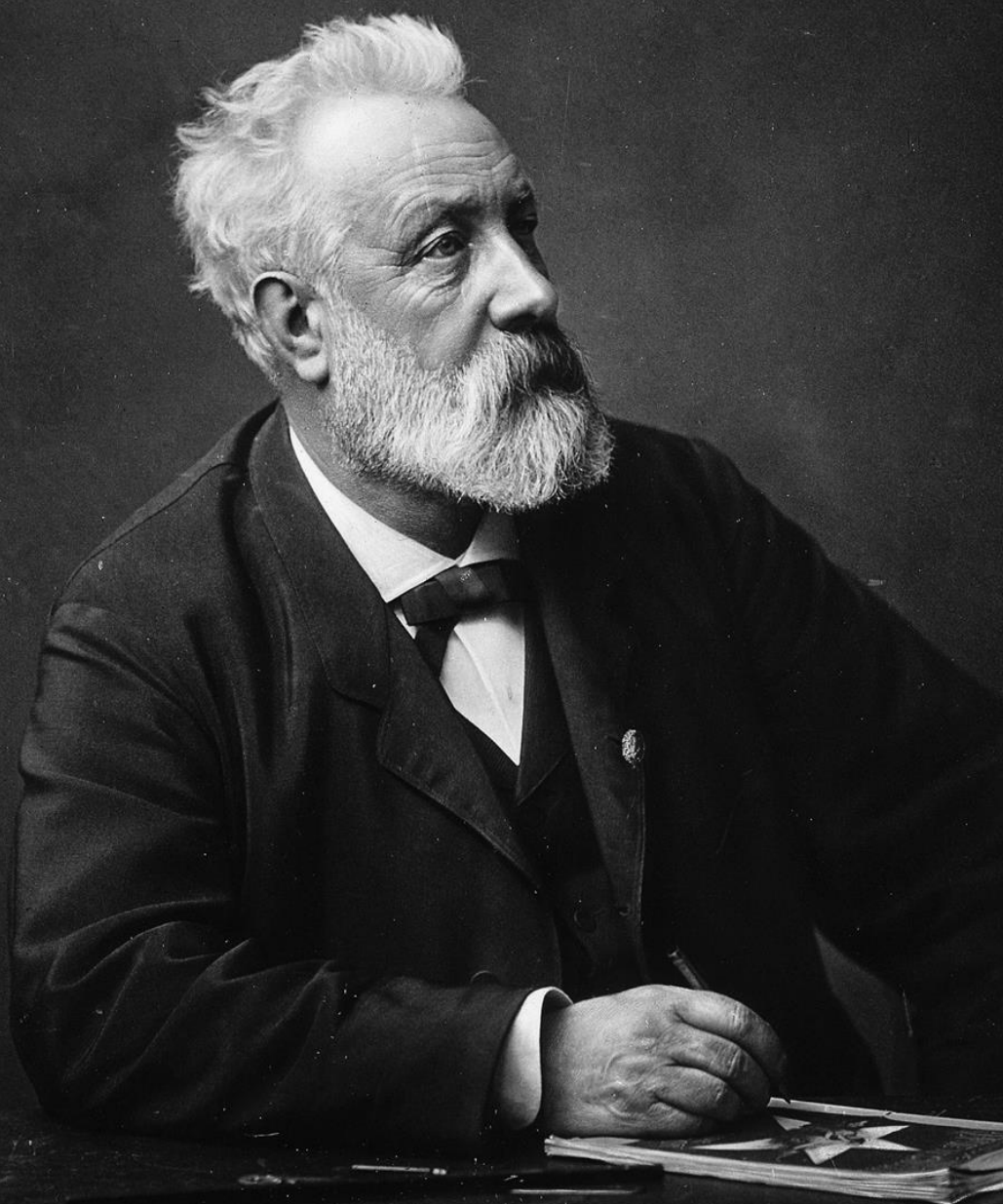
It is dedicated to the memory of pioneers Jean Chesneaux, Cécile Compère, Olivier Dumas, Charles-Noël Martin, François Raymond, and Simone Vierende, and to the far-flung camaraderie of devoted Verne scholars: Daniel Compère, Arthur Evans, Piero Gondolo della Riva, Jean-Michel Margot, Ariel Pérez, Jean-Pierre Picot, Christian Robin, Jean-Yves Tadié, and Wim Thierens.



1. Arthur C. Clarke during the filming of 2001: *A space odyssey*  
(February 1965)



2. Illustration from *From the Earth to the Moon*  
(illustrated by Henri de Montaut, 1865)



3. Jules Verne in 1892 (Ch. Herbert)

# Introduction

“Joolsvurn” is an invisible man.<sup>2</sup> Probably the most translated writer in the world (*JVEST* 43), he remains the opposite of a classic: a household name from Teesside to Tibet, but shunned by the school curricula and histories of literature. Although his intelligence and technique have created hypnotic page-turners, some bookshops seem unaware he actually wrote novels.

But why study the life of Jules Verne (1828–1905)? Quite simply, to understand his influence on the modern world, arguably as great as anyone’s. Verne is one of the most read of all writers nine—times as much as the next Frenchman.<sup>3</sup> He invented a new genre, although not the one associated with his name. His books dominate the box office. But still their creator is ignored, his life a black box.

The crux of the matter lies in his reputation. There has been a misunderstanding of Verne’s work: he did not write for children; he cannot be said to have published science fiction; and he was not pro-technology.

Of his many scores of works, three are world famous. In *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), Dr Lidenbrock and Axel enter the crater of Snæfells in Iceland and head down through the strata of geological time. They discover a lost world containing the body of a

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<sup>2</sup> The present edition is updated and revised from *Jules Verne: The Definitive Biography* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2006). It incorporates extensive new material about the radical differences between Verne’s manuscripts and his published novels.

<sup>3</sup> Verne is “the most read, the most published, and the most translated among all world literature” (Martin, PhD, 70). Abbreviated titles of the most frequently cited works will be used, as indicated in the Bibliography. References to Verne’s works will be by chapter (as roman numerals, with part number if any, e.g. II xxxix) to allow use of any edition.

white man, live sea-monsters, and a giant herding mastodons, before riding a volcanic eruption back up to the surface.

*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas* (1869)—to give the right title—presents Captain Nemo and his beloved *Nautilus* through the eyes of his obtuse prisoner, Dr Aronnax. The two commune with the ruins of Atlantis, dive below the ice-cap to conquer the South Pole, fight off hordes of Papuans and giant squid, and finally plunge into the Maelstrom. But much of the interest comes from the anguish gripping the sombre captain, and at the end a shocked Aronnax concludes that he is going round sinking ships. (The published versions are summarised here; the manuscripts are very different.)

In *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872), Fogg—stiff, repressed, British—bets the Reform Club that he can circle the globe in a stipulated time. With an irrepressible Frenchman and an Indian beauty, he fights through dense jungle, explores Hong Kong, shoots a few Sioux, and chops up his boat for fuel—only to get home five minutes late. But he has gained a day by travelling eastwards, and makes a triumphant entrance to his club.

Five other works written in the same decade are of similar interest. *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1860–3) is set in 1960, complete with cars, faxes, pollution, Americanisation, and degradation of the language and lifestyle; the poet hero fails in love and work and succumbs to cold, hunger, and isolation. This anti-science-fiction novel was unequivocally rejected by Verne's publisher, Hetzel.

*The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1864), with its poetic settings and riveting authenticity, features a Briton's quest for the North Pole. Setting off via Baffin Bay, Hatteras's expedition undergoes hunger, frostbite, and disease. After various tragedies, the survivors discover an open Polar Sea, teeming with monsters. At 90 degrees north surges an island in full eruption. As the captain dives into the volcano to reach the absolute Pole, his American rival drags him back. Hatteras's failure drives him mad.

The good-humoured *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) describes preparations for a manned launch from Florida, monitored by a giant telescope in the Rockies. However, the target is missed and the volume ends with the astronauts lost in orbit round the moon.

In *The Mysterious Island* (1874), five Northern balloonists escape the American Civil War to land on a Pacific landmass. They proceed

to colonise it while marvelling at a series of providential events. Eventually they find a stranded *Nautilus* and a dying Nemo, renouncing his anarchistic activism for good deeds, piety, and jingoism, before the island blows up.

The dazzling story “Edom” features Atlantis and a haughty twenty-first-century Sinitic humanity, which slowly realises it is trapped in a recurrent cycle of destruction and rebirth: almost the only real science fiction published under Verne’s name.<sup>4</sup>

Our understanding of Verne passes through generations of interpretations and by-products. Unfortunately, the majority of works in English are doubly fakes, betrayals of censored works. Not a single word of chapter 1 in the most popular *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, for instance, corresponds to the French original; and a majority of editions of *Twenty Thousand Leagues*<sup>5</sup> abridge the novel by a quarter. In the translated versions the heroes visit the “disagreeable territories of Nebraska” or “jump over” part of an island; steel has a density “0.7 or 0.8 that of water”; reference is made to “prunes” or “Galilee”; and Napoleon dies broken-hearted in “St Helen’s”. Verne himself wrote “the Badlands”, “blowing up”, “plums”, “7.8”, “Galileo”, and “St Helena”!<sup>6</sup> It is these bowdlerised hack jobs that films and commentary have usually been based on.

In France Verne is the author generating the largest number of literary analyses, but his life still remains largely virgin territory. My reservation about even the best scholarship is methodological. It has invariably addressed the intellectual history of Verne’s writings, but neglected his personal life. Let us consider the following list, almost Vernian in its scope.

No biography has traced the author’s family tree back to the fifteenth century. None has analysed his early environment. None has

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<sup>4</sup> The science-fiction sections of this story are probably not by Jules Verne, but by his son Michel. The definition of science fiction employed here is “a genre of fiction based on imagined future technological or scientific advances, major environmental or social changes, etc., and frequently portraying time travel and life on other planets” (*Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)).

<sup>5</sup> Abbreviated titles of the most frequently cited works will be used, as indicated in the Bibliography. References to Verne’s works will be by chapter (as roman numerals, with part number if any (e.g. II xxxix)) to allow use of any edition.

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Walter James Miller, “Jules Verne in America”, in *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, Walter James Miller (ed.) (New York: Crowell, 1976); in a modern German edition; detected by myself in *Journey to England and Scotland* at proof stage (vii–xxii).

identified his best friends or traced his path to nursery school, to his grandmother's, or to church. No one has presented his family's links with the slave trade, his visits to Britain, or the attic rooms he lived in.

No English or French biography has mentioned a full-length treasure trove about the writer's early life.<sup>7</sup> No biography has benefited from a unique, Borgesian collection of every article ever written on Verne, lovingly collected and catalogued by Swiss–American and Anglo–Dutch researchers.<sup>8</sup> No biographer has examined every work published by Verne.<sup>9</sup>

But this is still only part of the story. Although *Jules Verne* will concentrate on the man himself, the writing cannot be ignored. Verne's passing off and borrowing started as private matters, but ended up in court.

Other discoveries include the writer's correspondence with his family, including ejaculatory and scatological imagery and banned worldwide; 1,400 letters to the two Hetzels, recently made available; and many interviews with British and American journalists. (None of these volumes, I'm afraid, is available in English.)

Nevertheless, I would claim that these advances pale in significance beside one fact. The texts lacerated by the English "translators" already betrayed the novelist, for the works devoured by hundreds of millions were altered by the French publisher.

Scholars have pored over every draft of quite minor literary pieces, but not those of the only universal Frenchman. For most of their existence, Verne's manuscripts remained about as accessible as the Chinese Politburo minutes.

I was fortunate enough to obtain under-the-counter copies (becoming the first person to see the set since Verne). One worldwide exclusive aspect here will therefore be the inception of the major works, how their plots and meanings evolved, or rather regressed, under Hetzel's tutelage. The apolitical, nonviolent, and desexed im-

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve, *Jules Verne: Souvenirs personnels*. The works mentioned briefly in this introduction are fully referenced in the Bibliography.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Michel Margot generously sent me a copy of his unpublished catalogue, a meticulous work of scholarship analysing and thematically classifying all 10,000 then known documents about Verne.

<sup>9</sup> If only *The 1857 Salon* (1857), discovered by myself in 2005.



age of the series of Extraordinary Journeys is erroneous, as I shall show, draft by adulterated draft, comma by transmogrified comma.

In teasingly brief summary, then, we shall see how originally the United States attempted to muscle in on the British North Pole, Hatteras duelled with his rival on a melting ice floe, and committed suicide at the Pole; how Nemo was first a Polish noble revenging the Russian rape of his daughters, then displayed unmistakably French characteristics; how Phileas Fogg's first faltering steps were governed by the expressiveness of his lower body (this is the expurgated version!); how other famous works lost entire chapters, including a utopian, hi-tech land beneath Scotland; how the publisher himself wrote several chapters, in an instantly recognisable, penny-dreadful style; how the dying Nemo remained free and defiant to the end; and how the futuristic aspects of "Edom" were not by Jules Verne.

In both this and the central focus of Verne's everyday life, my approach will be evidence-driven. At the risk of neglecting the metaphysics, ontology, and hermeneutics beloved of Continental critics, I will be asking such untheoretical questions as when?, with who?, what for?, and how much?

I will thus be looking at the nitty-gritty of the novelist's life: his appearance, his schoolmates, the shape of his bedroom, what he ate for breakfast, who he slept with, who he fell out with or was sued by, the fibs he told, how he got on with his bosses, what his sexual fantasies were, where he holidayed, what he read, and whether he was a good husband and father.

One brief example will illustrate my approach: why Verne was obsessed with all things Scottish. Verne almost certainly had a noble Caledonian ancestor, although no one has looked up his address. On his first recorded foreign trip, he describes waking up to a view of Edinburgh Castle and Arthur's Seat and flirting with a local lass; never having seen a mountain or a lake before, for the next 30 years a litany of Walter Scott, glens, bens, and eruptions will flow from his amazed pen.

My mistrust of generalisation will impact on both the structure and emphasis of the argument. The crux of the matter is that what is true in 1840 may be false by 1880. The boisterous young provincial heading for the capital bears little resemblance to the conserva-

tive provincial councillor at the peak of his fame. His underlying character may have stayed the same, for kindness and gentleness emerge from interview after interview even during the darkest years. But his views show little continuity. His attitudes towards Britain and America, for instance, veer from the adulatory to the libellous. At some stage in the 1870s, then, Verne's life changed dramatically, whether because of his wife and family, his move from Paris, a crisis in the writing itself, or the German occupation. At the same time, his output went into decline, surely a reaction to the cutting of many of his best episodes.

These dark decades contained enough drama to fill several volumes. Michel was judged insane by his father and imprisoned. His favourite nephew shot him, crippling him for life. The works published after Verne's death in 1905 puzzled many readers, for they contained radical political, philosophical, and scientific ideas, the reason being that Michel wrote much of them.

It is clear then that Verne's life remains unknown. His reputation, even during his lifetime, already suffered, for his works could not express social, political, or religious views—if only because his characters were not allowed to visit France. Conundrum: which writer set works in Russia, China, and America, only for them to be unavailable in their respective countries?<sup>10</sup>

My central aim will be to complement research on Verne's life with the evidence from the works, especially the all-important manuscripts. I hope to show what sort of man Jules was, how he achieved what he did, what made him tick.

This book represents the sum of decades of living and dreaming the novelist, dragging family and friends into “his” châteaux, up his mountains, and down his rivers, arguing his sexuality and politics over breakfast *dim sum*.

The result will surprise those who know Verne only by hearsay.

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<sup>10</sup> *Michel Strogoff* (1876) was not published in Russia until the twentieth century; *Tribulations of a Chinese in China* (1879) appeared in China only in 2003 (with the sensitive parts removed); *Humbug* appeared in English in 1992.

# Prologue

“I can’t stand fun any more. My character has changed beyond recognition, and I’ll never get over what I’ve been through.”<sup>11</sup>

On 9 March 1886 the man who would write these bitter words had it all. His books had brought him fame and fortune, he had two new grandchildren, and for the first time a science-fiction story had appeared under his name.<sup>12</sup>

Yet within minutes his existence would be shattered. His nephew, perhaps the person he felt closest to, tried to kill him, laming him for life and making him writhe in pain for years. A week later, the man died who had rescued him from poverty. A year later his mother passed away in turn, undoubtedly affected by the treacherous assault; but he felt too ill to attend either funeral. To cap it all, his inspiration faltered and his writing slid downwards.

The assassination attempt did not come as a complete surprise, since everything had been in turmoil recently. His family’s hereditary insanity had re-emerged. He had again and again refused his son’s crazy business schemes and paid off his womanising debts. He had sold his steam yacht to a Balkan prince.

This last decision may have been a mistake. Travel had obsessed him since earliest childhood. Travel transcended a post-Napoleonic France raging impotently at her dismemberment. Travel prevented the intrusions of his wife who did not read his books and had little idea why he wrote them. Travel created an ideal community of like-minded males living in closest intimacy. Travel had been, above all, his *raison d’être* since the first stunning bestsellers. His writing penetrated virgin territory, spiritually commingled with the globe’s last unbesmirched realms; it revealed character through exotic shared

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<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Paul of 20 June 1894.

<sup>12</sup> “In the Year 2889”; the story was in fact written by his son Michel.

challenges. Giving it up was tantamount to personal and professional suicide.

By renouncing his dream machine, he severed his links with the wonder “out there”. He abandoned Phileas Fogg desperately burning his boat, Captain Nemo defying the hurricanes, the heaving Polar monsters, the underground dinosaurs, the South Pacific dream, the Atlanteans, the carefree space travel, the fresh Scottish lass, and the ravishing Indian. He exchanged his yacht—the flesh of his flesh, his castle, his last link to Brittany—for utility bills, club routine, and sandy deckchairs. Henceforth his perspective would be a smoky tunnel in an ugly industrial town and his wife’s increasingly hamster-like cheeks.

So the balding figure with the sagging left eye who scoured the Union Club’s periodicals that afternoon felt drained and stranded, half the man he’d once been. Perhaps he even helped to bring on the tragic events, to provide a material pretext for the black despair, to slash some way, any way, out of the failure of his life.

His mood was not good then as he turned right into Rue Charles Dubois at 5.15 that wintry Tuesday. His skin was still hale and hearty, crinkled around the warm, affectionate eyes. With his navy, almost ankle-length overcoat, circular, snow-white beard, peaked cap, and slightly bowed legs, he could pass for a captain still lusting for a sea-going breeze. The bare trees threatened slightly in the fading light, and the heavy houses betrayed the harmony of his semi-classical, semi-marine childhood dreams. How could he have swapped salt for soot, adventure for comfort? Thriving as he did on adversity, had all the success removed some vital spark? He only knew the lethargy of his brain, its muddiness, its gravity. Where were the heady fantasies that used to come bucketing out? Now he had to plan everything, force himself a little, reorganise and rehash a great deal.

At least his four-storey house, with the spreading servants’ quarters and airy reception rooms, displayed fanciful touches. But was the cobbled courtyard too barren, the circular tower too folly-like? Why didn’t the gardener do something about the ivy strangling the trees? At least he’d get a warm reception from Follet, his jet-black spaniel, bounding out of kennel, tail lolling. So was it Honorine

producing his dejection? She was certainly not the helpmeet he'd dreamed of in the early days.

He was following his neighbour Gustave Fréron, not even hailing him, and dejectedly opening the front gate, when he heard an explosion to the left.<sup>13</sup> A carnival was in full swing and it could just be a firework. Had he subliminally noticed the stone doorframe spitting a fragment? In any case another blast came—and then a searing, bone-shattering pain as metal slammed into his ankle-length boot and crunched deep into his left shin. A cry came: “You bastard!” He bent to investigate the ankle. Even now, despite the unbearable pain, he maintained control. He shouted to Fréron “Stop him!” and pointed to a young man only 15 feet away. He loped agonisingly towards the assassin, still shouting something.

With a shock, he recognised his favourite nephew!

His heart beat madly as he observed Gaston's dusty shoes, dishevelled hair, manic gleam, and shiny revolver. He loved him. He treasured his seriousness, so unlike his son's rashness. He had marvelled at his high-powered job in Paris, due if truth be told to his own string-pulling.

A one-stripe policeman had appeared out of thin air. Gaston stood there like an automaton, arms hanging. The three men began to manoeuvre him into the courtyard, using reassuring body language. Only then did they enquire whether he might not wish to hand over the gun for safe keeping.

Verne's mind searched for reasons. With “the dreamy mouse”, as he called him, he'd shared tempests and moments of great happiness. Together they'd seen his adored Edinburgh and transcendental Western Isles, then, two years later, England, Holland, and Denmark.

He feverishly went over Gaston's recent nervous breakdown, as well as his rantings about fighting duels to get his own back and giv-

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<sup>13</sup> This account derives from a large number of sources, including: Verne's own recollections as reported by interviewers (*Int.* 117, 179); [9 Mar. 86] and [10 Mar. 86] to Hetzel *files*; Volker Dehs, “En 1886”, *BSJV* 118:32–7; Norbert Percereau, “Le Destin de Gaston Verne”, *BSJV* 155:4–52; and the contemporary newspapers, especially *L'Univers illustré* of 20 March 1886, *The Times* of 11 March 1886, and *Journal d'Amiens*. (The system of abbreviated references to letters by date is explained in note 9 to chapter 1 below.)

In these notes, references separated by semicolons refer to distinct ideas in the text, those by commas to the same idea.

ing the slip to the policeman following him everywhere. And above all he remembered their terrible arguments over the last few months. The nephew's motive had to be revenge for the "family affairs of such sensitivity that I am unable to divulge them", as Gaston told the chief constable that evening.

And then it was over. He forgot his responsibilities, his surroundings, everything, to concentrate on the volcanic pain erupting from his ankle. His whole being confronted the stellar sensation, sharp at the centre and throbbing far up his leg. As he yielded to its invasion, his body pumped compensating fluid that made his other limbs glow with well-being.

Afterwards he forgot the sequence of events. Had Gaston fallen into the arms of his Aunt Marie and pretty cousin Suzanne? How long before Gaston was carted off to the central police station? Before the diagnosis that his wound wasn't serious? Before he sank gratefully into the oblivion of the first, botched, operation? Before he realised the bullet could never be extracted and that he was lame for life?

In his few lucid moments between the ravings and the fevers, the bleedings and the infected suppurations, the ether and the morphine, he considered the world's press, buying for news. He decided on maximum damage control.

The charge was "attempted murder". Everyone knew Gaston had planned it carefully: escaping his aunt in Paris, buying a ticket for Dover, but alighting at Amiens to pace up and down outside, with six seven-millimetre bullets throbbing in his weapon.

But what motive should be provided? Most plausible seemed a refusal to protect Gaston from his enemies or give him money for England. The rest of the story read like a *crime passionnel*, with its unstable cocktail of resentment and rage, money and passion, illicit desires and unmentionable acts. Best to muddy the waters. He would invent a conversation between Gaston and himself before the shooting. He would cover up that the nephew had bought the gun three years previously, that he had aimed at his belt line. He would cite absurd, contradictory motives: to draw attention to his uncle's suitability for the French Academy or to send him to heaven.

So determined were the writer and his family to hush it all up that they silenced the papers, prevented legal action, and needlessly confined Gaston Verne to a foreign asylum.

So who was the victim? And what has he to do with us, from a different time, language, and culture? Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins, or Hercule Poirot may at any moment outshine Fogg or Nemo. Hamlet or Don Quixote get longer entries on Wikipedia. But over time Verne has outsold Shakespeare and indeed nearly everyone. Very few individuals have spoken in their own voice to so many human beings.

If you mention these facts to literature teachers or encyclopaedia editors, they reply with “poor style”, “past-his-sell-by-date inventor”, or, if Oxbridge-educated, “genre fiction”. But they offer no information about the man. The man who helped shape our world hails from nowhere in particular, has no sound bite in the public consciousness, remains unidentifiable without his first name. He had a talent unparalleled among the scores of billions of people who have ever lived for writing universally appealing stories—and for concealing his own fame.

If we look at the scores of photographs, thousands of letters, dozens of interviews, handful of autobiographical pieces, Verne shows a strong character. Like all geniuses, he both inhabited his time and transcended it. Unlike many of his compatriots, his nationality was not immediately evident. Like many writers, he channelled much of his personality into his books. Unlike most famous men, he kept himself to himself.

The cover-up of the murder attempt, then, epitomised Verne’s efforts to hide his private persona from posterity. This book will attempt to destroy his efforts.

To fully understand the ins and outs of the affair that so categorically ruined the life of a unique writer, and for a brief moment illuminated the man inside, we need to go back to the beginning. Only by systematically “seeking truth from facts” (as the Chinese saying goes), can we hope to understand the insouciant boy and the multifaceted man he fathered.



4. The Fish Market at the stern of Feydeau Island, with pyroscafs in the foreground