

The Life of Jules Verne

In 1828 Jules Verne was born in the French city of Nantes, the son of a magistrate. His childhood, spent in the important seaport, perhaps first drew him into the life-long interest in the unusual and imaginative. Yarns of strange lands and queer happenings were brought home by seamen, reports which may have grown mightily in the telling, but which young Verne relished. To this early interest in sea tales Verne must owe his realistic background of naval and marine affairs in such books as *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Not only stories of the sea riveted his attention, but he was also early possessed by imagining great new discoveries ahead.

However, he was expected from young boyhood to follow his father into the legal profession. His first repudiation of that plan occurred when he tried to change places with a ship's cabin boy. The substitution was almost successful. Verne was not discovered until the ship had cleared the harbor. There was no record of his trying such an adventure again.

Instead, older and a little wiser, he was sent to Paris to study law, though, after he had obtained his degree, he decided on a literary career. This was opposed by his family until after some of his work had been published.

He was enthusiastic from the start about mechanical devices, speculating about the possibility of flying machines, and even designing an omnibus in the form of a steam-propelled elephant.

For some years, Verne served as secretary for the Theatre Historique and set about writing plays. Still, it was necessary for him to supplement the very small fees of his position, so he turned to part-time stockbrokering, even though one of his plays—*Les Pailles Rompues*,

performed in 1850—was successful and gained the approval of Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo.

In 1857 Verne married a widow, Honorine Morel. He gained an immediate family of two stepdaughters to which was later added a son of his own, Michel.

Not satisfied with the lack of payment from his writing and unhappy with his other work, he was at a turning point in his career when the first sign of his particular talent was displayed in an article concerning the work of Edgar Allan Poe. In this he discussed cryptography and possible future devices to the extent of attracting an unusual amount of attention.

His continued interest in future devices is shown also in his correspondence. In 1862, when, excited by the construction of the balloon, the *Géant*, he invented his own better balloon and wrote an article about it, he was at the beginning of the career which was to make him noted. The discovery that he could write about science and adventure together was satisfying. Both mathematicians and engineers took his fantasizing seriously.

There followed a steady stream of such books, each bringing him a larger and larger public. During the Franco-Prussian War Verne and his family left Paris for safety. In 1872 when he returned to the city he brought several completed manuscripts, one being *Around the World in Eighty Days*, which excited international interest and was so realistic that many readers believed it true.

His last years were spent in travel on his own boat and in service on the municipal council of Amiens. Even after his sight began to fail he continued to write his fantastic adventures. In 1892 he was made an officer of the Legion of Honor.

When he died in Amiens at the age of seventy-seven his funeral was attended by some five thousand people.

Verne's principal novels were translated into English beginning in 1869 with *Five Weeks in a Balloon*. In 1911 a uniform edition of his works appeared. There have been since numerous adaptations of his stories for stage and later for the films.

—ANDRE NORTON