

## Foreword

---

For over a century now Jules Verne has been known as one of the founders of the science-fiction adventure story. Each of his books was centered upon action adventure, travel in strange places, and newly discovered marvels which the inventive species calling itself mankind dreamed into being. His earlier stories showed the vigorous optimism hailing the progress of the first half of the nineteenth century. Those who had witnessed the trading of the stagecoach for the steam train, knew the wonder of almost instant communication by telegraph, saw the rise of factories housing complicated machinery which did the work previously slowly and cumbersomely performed by the human hand, were only too ready to believe the day of man's brightest glory was at hand.

It was the firm belief that nothing could now halt the victories claimed by European man's superior culture—the wheel of progress had been set to turn forever. Great exhibitions showed both the ingenuity and wealth generated by constant invention and change. Not a small part of such gatherings were the new products still being produced as results of imaginative speculation. To those who were ambitious and excited by such displays anything might become possible in the future.

However, the first glow of this exuberance, produced by a steady stream of discoveries, did not last. Machines began to cause hitherto unthought of problems, mostly because of human factors. The race toward industrial ways of life and wealth, having once developed momentum, carried such changes farther and farther than even the prophets found acceptable. Verne, who had been filled with enthusiasm for what he saw as new freedom and the ability of man to master more and more of his

environment, began to display pessimism in his work after 1880, before which date his better known books had already been written. It is noticeable that later books showed shadows of questioning, close to fear, whether that ingenuity and imagination might not have a darker side. There were doubts of rightness in the course of events. Power could corrupt—science and nature were no longer to be accepted as fully under human control.

Verne's earlier books express fully his personal interest in adventure and travel in hitherto little known portions of the world. He possessed the inner urge of an explorer, to which he added quasiscientific explanations. As a romantic at heart he had discovered a new field in which he could expand some of the exciting dreams many readers themselves had had, but which had been firmly opposed as impossible, nothing to waste time upon.

His discovery of the works of Edgar Allan Poe opened a new door for Verne, showing it possible for him to allow ambitious dreams full freedom. After his study of Poe, he began to write in his own way books of lasting interest, though his first works, such as *A Voyage in a Balloon*, brought out in 1851, were only timid hints of what was to come.

Finding himself unable to make his fortune by his pen, he reluctantly became a stockbroker, mainly writing for his own pleasure. Then, in 1862, he entered into the partnership which was to lead to the steady publication of eagerly sought works, a partnership which would last his lifetime.

The publisher Hetsel, who was also a writer of juvenile books, planned a magazine to appeal to young readers. He asked Verne to do serials under the general title of "*Voyages Extraordinaire*."

Nothing could have better suited Verne's gift. He wrote with an enthusiastic wonder about the world's marvels, producing a youthful exuberance and clarity, to sweep readers on into believing that the future was a time when the impossible of their own day would become the accepted commonplace of another.

*Journey to the Center of the Earth*, published in 1872,

was one of the first of these prophetic novels. There was an already existing (like the story of lost Atlantis) speculation that the world might be hollow—containing land and sea such as were on the surface. (This same theory was also drawn upon in our own time to form the background for the Edgar Rice Burroughs' Pellucidar stories). The hollow-world legend fell in with Verne's desire for a proper background for a highly adventurous story.

He had already begun to develop a pattern of writing, putting into focus three very different main characters—a man of science, whose vision is so firmly fixed upon the purpose of the expedition that he is often a trial to his companions, an active man of great physical strength who provides bodily assistance throughout, and, lastly, an ordinary man through whose eyes we often see the progress of the actions and who represents the reader himself.

The technique of merging wonderment with scientific explanations became constant, leading to the writing of such classics as *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*, books which have remained in print for over a century.

In spite of his flights of vivid imagination Verne was in truth a conservative. He did not write of the future; his books were laid in his own time and dealt with problems such as might face his readers if they were to be plunged into the same situations. This added to the plausibility of the stories.

Verne has been accused by some critics of carelessness in his use of scientific matter. However, many such mistakes were actually the fault of poor translations. He might write in the style of boyish, escapist dreaming but this could be shared by the French middle class of his day. In this style he introduces ideas which appear to be the logical outgrowth of that which was certain to come when all nature would be obedient to man and man himself had evolved to a state improved upon when compared to the first creation.

While *Journey to the Center of the Earth* was written near the beginning of the period when Verne's greatest

work was done, it is simple in style and plot. The "mad professor" is very much to the fore, and the strong man of his favorite characterization is hardly more than a figure put in to carry baggage as a silent employee. The "ordinary man," who is swept along on an expedition which he dislikes and fears from the start, is very much only the unheroic spectator of any worthwhile discovery, thus enhancing the professor's triumphs.

However, it is not really the three explorers who keep the modern reader interested, it is rather the old, old excitement of what will happen next. By that measure Verne does not fail.

—ANDRE NORTON