

**WORLDS OF****SCIENCE FICTION**

SEPTEMBER 1952

**All Stories New and Complete**

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# Personalities IN SCIENCE FICTION

JULES VERNE

*Today, He Would Be  
Amazed*

IN DESIGNATING Jules Verne as the father of science fiction as it is known today, one can immediately draw sharp criticism from those who allocate the role to Leonardo da Vinci. It is an honor, however, that the great Italian could easily give away as a crumb from his table. And one Verne must have in order to gain the stature he deserves, and also as payment for well nigh incredible work as a pioneer.

Verne, a Frenchman, was born in 1828 in Nantes. There was neither great wealth, nor excessive poverty in his background. He received an adequate education, and if there was any point of particular interest in his youth, it was the vague, but definitely tangible restlessness that plagued his early years.

He became a fairly successful playwright long before there is any indication of his later interest in the scientific fiction through which his name will live.

A close study of Verne, high-

lights the fact that he himself is only half his own story. To get the full picture, he must be considered along with the time in which he lived.

It was a time of the colossal French unrest that ended in one of the greatest bloodbaths in history. The masses—a designation so dear to the heart of the ponderous historian—were stirring under the perfumed heels of the French aristocrats. Every school child knows what happened.

But another revolution of the period, centered in the industrial Europe of the times, has been to a great extent overlooked or generalized, perhaps because its end-result was not outlined by the sharp blade of a guillotine.

The industrial revolution.

The intellectual level, nay the intelligence level, of the period was low, but there was enough perception to fear the Machine and what it could do. Science was a completely unknown and untried component. The theory of science creating machines which would in turn free men from previously necessitous slavery was not readily grasped. Such a concept had to come from some proof in that direction, and at

that time there was no proof.

There was, however, even then, proof that machines could put vast numbers of men out of work. Under the systems of the seventeenth century, this could mean actual starvation for people who earned their bread in the labor market.

It is little wonder, then, that science was a thing to be feared and this point, in itself, makes Jules Verne not only a pioneer, but a very remarkable literary technician. To understand a man, it is necessary to understand what he faces. To get the picture, we have but to compare his time with ours.

THE writer of today has little else to do but experience an urge to write and then look around for his field. If he selects science fiction as his creative medium, he finds a well worn rut into which to fit his steering gear. The momentum has already been provided. He rides along in an established field, partaking of the dignity built by those who came before.

Verne was the first of these. He faced a world that really did not want what he had—or rather—what his imagination and instinct forced him to produce. He won his audience from a fearful, reluctant public, who cringed from what he gave them, yet read it from pure fascination.

His works are filled, of course with a perceptive power. Perhaps very few people today would care for them. They are styled to another day, a slower and more ponderous day when the streamlined stylism of today's literature would have been

as quickly rejected as some of us, today, reject the styles of the old masters.

VERNE'S work is a paradox, in that it is a mixture of astounding perceptions and naive inconsistencies. The inconsistencies, however, spring from the limitations of the time; limitations which even a genius of Verne's stature could not overcome.

As an example, there is an illustration of one of his books on a trip to the Moon. The picture is meant to highlight the absolute cold of space. It shows three men, obviously halfway to the Moon, inside their rocket. The room, or cabin, they occupy is that of a typical, seventeenth century parlor. The three men are dressed for the street—for a warm day in the street, that is—because they haven't a single overcoat among them. One wears a top hat and the other two have shawls over their heads. They are crouched, and stomping their feet to keep warm. There seems to be some snow drifting in from somewhere.

But those who would laugh at this illustration, could be quickly silenced by a drawing of an under-sea burial, the stunning impact of which has probably never been equalled to this day. Save for an ancient handlamp held by one of the mourners, the illustration would do far more than justice to any current science fiction story of under-water activities.

There are many indications that

Jules Verne did not write scientific fiction from choice; that he possibly nurtured an actual dislike for it. He left the field many times to further other literary ends. But he always came back; possibly because his vital and entirely original imagination would not let him do otherwise.

He produced a prodigious amount of copy, all of which in its day, was widely read. But it is natural that a writer is remembered for certain of his works, while the bulk of his efforts is lost in the sweep of time. Of all his works, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, could be rated as his greatest. Possibly because, in this story, he described with inconceivable accuracy, the almost exact shape of a single thing to come.

The submarine.

**H**IS *Around the World in Eighty Days* will also, probably live as long as books are read.

But the impact here is somewhat blunted in that Verne accurately foretold a general future condition —the speed at which man would someday travel, by whatever method.

Also, the story is somewhat blurred by the fact that even Verne himself could not envision a condition which time and progress would not antiquate. His error here was that he left an opening for a sequel —*Around the World in Eighty Minutes*.

This situation does not hold true in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. After reading it, one can experience only anticlimax no matter what has been or will be. When Verne finished, there was no more to be said.

But regardless, Verne's niche is secure. In a dim and groping past, he established, with a quill pen and an agile mind, a trend in scientific fiction from which the writer of today or tomorrow will deviate but little.

—pwf