



Jules Verne.
Photo by L. Caron, Amiens.

THE PROPHECIES OF ROMANCE.

JULES VERNE ON SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS.

BY CHARLES DAWBARN.

OME one said of Jules Verne : " His novels amuse you like the best of Alexandre Dumas, and instruct you like the books of François Arago"—a famous French astronomer and savant. In their swiftness and exhilaration his voyages give the reader the sensation of travel whilst sitting at home ; in their precision of detail, they have really the value of scientific works. He has given a greater stimulus to the mind of the young than any living author ; moreover, has he not seen his scientific speculations marvellously fulfilled ? His *Five Weeks in a Balloon* has been the preface to a remarkable chapter in aerial navigation ; his cruise of the *Nautilus* an awakening of the world to the power of the submarine. It was indeed because present events had cast their shadow over Jules Verne's books that I sought a

conversation with him in the good town of Amiens.

We began to speak of the actual accomplishment of some of the scientific problems that are solved "on paper" in the vivid volumes of the "personally conducted" tours to the centre of the earth, or wherever M. Verne, in his fancy, transports us. " You must not regard me as a savant," he disclaimed laughingly, " or even as an engineer or chemist. I merely use my imagination and literary skill to argue from what is possible to what *may* be possible - to-morrow. Thefeat of Michael Strogoff in riding from Moscow to Irkutsk has already been accomplished. As to my tour round the world in eighty days, that has already been surpassed. M. Gaston Steigler, of the Paris *Matin*, made the circuit in sixty-three days, but he had the assistance of the Siberian and

Manchurian railways (though not in their present completed form). I saw him when he came through Amiens on his return journey, and we fell into each other's arms. Some ten or twelve years ago, too, the famous Miss Nellie Bly—who subsequently married a rich American, I believe—performed the journey in seventy-two days. She came to see me when she was staying at Boulogne. But at the time when I wrote the book, which was in 1872, there was, of course, no Siberian Railway. I was attracted to the subject by a forecast in a newspaper as to what would be the possibilities of travel before the end of the century, and setting forth the itinerary. So I created my character of Phileas Fogg." And both talker and listener smiled, as recollections of the amusing traits of the mathematical Englishman rose to the mind. "I began my novel after I had found the dénouement, which is my usual practice. The dénouement in this case was, if you remember, the difference in hours according to whether one follows or precedes the sun. Fogg believes that he has arrived a day too late to win his bet, but I show that he has really gained a day in putting a girdle about the globe. It may interest you to know that *Round the World* has been played eighteen hundred times on the Paris stage, and *Michael Strogoff* fifteen hundred times."

"It is curious that the record you establish by an Englishman is broken by a Frenchman in real life," I remarked.

"Yes, I have been much impressed by the quality of your nation as travellers, war-correspondents, and so on, as exemplified in the persons of Franklin, Livingstone and Stanley. In *Michael Strogoff*, if you recollect, I have put the two nations in competition—an English and a French reporter. They begin by cordially hating each other; they end by being excellent friends." I could not help thinking that Jules Verne had also foreseen the *entente*.

"But it is in the submarine that you have witnessed the most striking adoption of your ideas," I suggested.

"There, again," he answered, with genuine modesty, "I am not to be taken as a prophet. Before I wrote my *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, the submarine existed. I merely took the deal as it was and developed it. Captain Nemo wishes to cut himself off from all human communication; hence I give

him the name. I place him in an element where he can not only obtain motive power by electricity from the waves, but draw all his daily necessities therefrom."

"And do you really believe in the existence of those oceanic treasures, those mines and those hidden continents that you describe in the cruise of the *Nautilus* and in *Robur the Conqueror*?"

A moment later, I felt the question was taking a mean advantage of the author, casting doubt as it were on the legitimacy of his literary offspring. Jules Verne smiled just a little enigmatically. "Well, you know," he said, "they might exist. We know, for instance, of buried treasure off the coast of Spain."

Our conversation slipped from under-sea navigation, mid-ocean grottoes and fathomless depths, to the actualities of the war on the eastern edge of Asia. "Naval warfare," half-soliloquised M. Verne, "has been completely revolutionised. The battleship can no longer feel secure against the submarine and the torpedo. Just imagine a simple dynamite cartridge produces an explosion sufficient to split a steel rail: what, then, must be the effect of one of those huge cartridges, a torpedo driven by compressed air, upon the ship's side? Its range of action is two miles."

I asked M. Verne whether he supposed submarines would ever be able to attack one another, their power of observation, at present, being limited to the periscope on the surface of the water.

M. Jules Verne professed an inability to prophesy, but he remarked that in his *Face au Drapeau* he had described a fight between submarines in the islands of the Bermudas. "That, of course," he said, "is a different thing from fighting in the open, because I make one submarine try to enter a cavern and another prevent it. They are thus confined within a narrow rocky channel."

"Is it your idea that we are drawing near the cessation of war?"

"Oh no: people will always fight. I do not believe in Hague Conferences. Look at what has happened since the Tsar's attempt at universal disarmament. There are, however, certain influences at work to limit wars in the future. One is the difficulty, owing to the perfection of armaments on either side, of bringing your operations to a definite issue; and the other is the costliness of it. The

most astonishing thing, nowadays, is the speed with which perfection is arrived at in scientific appliances."

From submarine I turned to aerial navigation. M. Verne was ready with his habitual disclaimer, that he was no pioneer. His *Five Weeks in a Balloon* was, it is interesting to note, the first book of his series of extraordinary adventures and voyages, which now number eighty-eight volumes. But M. Verne has not obtained his impressions of life above the clouds from personal experience. He has always preferred the earth as a promenade, and his practical acquaintance with aerial navigation is limited to an hour's ascent in a spherical balloon at Amiens. Nevertheless, he takes great interest in problems of the air, and has belonged, for years, to the famous Paris society "*Plus Lourd que l'Air*," that is to say, the aviators or those who imitate the flight of birds, as opposed to the doctrine of "Lighter than Air," which is the cardinal principle of the balloonists.

Though M. Verne lays no claim to the right to be considered an inventor, he merits the distinction, because, whilst keeping his feet firmly fixed on the possible, he allows his imagination to soar into the future. His stories are the "looking backward" of Science, woven from the "enlarged" occurrences of the daily press. The delightfully imaginative episode of to-day becomes the hard reality of to-morrow.

M. Verne has remained faithful all his life to the Picardy capital, and has resisted the social and literary attractions of a residence in Paris. Amiens, it need hardly be said, is immensely proud of its distinguished citizen. Long before arriving at the charming house on the Boulevard Longueville, which has been the novelist's home for many years, the visitor has had many evidences of the respect and esteem with which the French boys' hero is regarded by his neighbours. "His health has not been at all good for some time," one hears; "Mme Verne receives his friends," and so on. But greater evidence than any of his popularity is to be found in the long row of well-thumbed books in the town library, where the youth of the district have pored with fascinated eyes and spell-bound senses over the woodcuts and the letterpress that depict the wondrous adventures of Captain Hatteras; of

Gideon Spilett, special reporter for the *New York Herald*, and of his companions-in-arms on the mysterious island: Habert, and Cyrus Smith, Pencroff and Nab. The degree of popularity of the Jules Verne books can be traced by that line of bound volumes. The most worn and dog-eared of them all is, precisely, *The Mysterious Island*, and after that come *Round the World in Eighty Days*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, *The Floating Island*, and *The Earth to the Moon*. Wonderful and palpitating stories indeed!

Jules Verne has the features of a Scotsman, but his soul is the soul of a Frenchman; he speaks no other language but his own. His beard is whitened, for he has already overstepped the three-score years and ten and is hastening on to eighty. He suffers from writer's cramp; he has not been out since the beginning of the year, and his eyes are affected. Nevertheless, under this accumulation of disadvantages, he is still cheerful, talks with a certain animation, and in manner and gesture remains alert and active.

After our first greeting, M. Verne said: "I cherish many grateful memories of England. I have been there many times in my yacht, the *Michel*, exploring the Thames and so on. I made the tour of the Western Isles of Scotland, too: Fingal's cave, indeed, inspired a description in one of my books. I have had many interesting letters from English boys, some asking for my autograph, others expressing interest in one of my stories. Two years ago I was much gratified to receive a gold-headed walking-stick subscribed for by the young people of England. I treasure it very much."

M. Verne's heroes travel a good deal more and a good deal faster than he does. His thrilling descriptions of scenes in India and the Far East have been built up from books or from the accounts of friends. Nearer home, however, he has covered the habitual touring ground, whilst in his yacht he has made extended cruises in the Mediterranean. But these pleasant excursions came to an abrupt end some twenty years ago, when a madman's bullet, received in the streets of Amiens, forced M. Verne to keep his bed for four or five months and to sell his yacht.

"My youthful enthusiasm for the

literature of travel was fired by Sterne," he said, when we came to discuss formative influences on his writings. "How I have revelled in the *Sentimental Journey* and *Tristram Shandy*! For Dickens I have the most absolute admiration. I have read him entirely several times over. Ah! Mr. Pickwick and Tom Pinch and Martin Chuzzlewit." The novelist nodded his head at each name, as if he were glad to salute an old acquaintance. "You have everything in Dickens," he continued: "imagination, humour, love, charity, pity for the poor and oppressed — everything, in fact. As to Fenimore Cooper, I have the whole of his thirty volumes." And M. Verne began to descend on the fine dramatic qualities of *The Path-Finder* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. Presently he said, "I am very much struck with your new writer, H. G. Wells. His is a very special kind of vein; his books are most curious. There is a world of difference in our methods," observed the Frenchman reflectively. "I believe I am more the true romancer of the two. Mr. Wells imagines the accomplishment of certain feats by impossible means. For instance, when he wishes to project his hero through space he invents a metal without weight. Now, when I send my man to the moon I send him in a cannon. It is certain that if any one does visit the moon it will be by that means. You cannot go there in a balloon, because there is no atmosphere six miles above the earth." Finally M. Verne summed up his Anglo-Saxon *confrère* by remarking, "You are a race apart, and Mr. Wells stands for English imagination more than any living author."

Jules Verne rises early, like most successful writers, and has accomplished his day's work before noon. The afternoon he devotes to a study of the newspapers and magazines: "I read twenty journals a day," he told me; and he finds there the material for his romantic voyages. He began life with thoughts of the law. He studied the manuals of the jurisconsults to please his parents; but he wrote plays in verse to please himself. It is difficult to imagine the well-ordered fancy and scientific precision of a Jules Verne harnessed to so runaway a steed as the dramatic Muse. He wrote at least a dozen poetical dramas, none of which, he declared, with a tinge

of sadness in his tones, saw the light. Jules Verne even wrote an historical drama founded on the English Gunpowder Plot. Curious that it should have been reserved for a Frenchman to see the dramatic possibilities (and in verse, too!) of Guy Fawkes.

As I have said, his books number eighty-eight — his publisher would never allow him to deviate from his *genre* — but M. Verne has, in reality, written a hundred; the other books being prepared in advance. For that reason the volumes will continue to appear at regular intervals of two each year, notwithstanding that their gifted author has laid aside his pen, perhaps for ever. The next book, to appear in July, will deal with automobilism; it will, if it please you, be the morrow of the Gordon-Bennett cup — the last cry of the distance annihilator. M. Verne in private life, however, has little sympathy with automobilism. "One goes at so many miles faster than the railway train, but is that real progress?" he asked. "And all this sport, to which the young Frenchman is now addicted, I regard it as most deplorable. It is a sign of decadence. Much better to make brains instead of strong arms and legs."

It was the natural expression, no doubt, of a man who, though he has written many breathless pages, is now descending the vale, where the race is no longer to the swift.

As I said good-bye, M. Verne, with the pride of a loyal Amienois, bade me go to see the Museum, which is rich with a series of frescoes by Puvis de Chavannes. Never has the master been seen to greater advantage — not even in the Panthéon. Amongst the eight hundred pictures representing the public-spirited generosity of the neighbourhood, is the canvas of "Napoleon signing the Treaty of Amiens" in 1802. Equally was local history concerned with a vase of purest Sèvres, souvenir of the visit of the Empress Eugénie to cholera-stricken Amiens.

As the train hurried us from this interesting old town, full of present promise and past achievement, I reflected on the last days of this fine old man, who has made his generation brighter and happier and better informed; who has whispered to the boys of the world of courage and adventure, and made them feel the thrill that comes from the investigation of the unknown.