

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

Jules Verne

Jules Verne was born in 1828. He studied law at Paris, but turned to writing almost immediately after completing his education, and brought out his first comedy in 1850. This was followed by several comic operas. However, he is chiefly known by his "scientific romances," of which the first, "Five Weeks in a Balloon," appeared in 1863. "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea" is perhaps the best example of Verne's tales of the marvels of invention, and we have to remember that when it was written, in 1873, nobody had yet succeeded in making a boat to travel under water. For that reason it was, in a way, a prophetic book, shadowing forth the wonderful possibilities of human ingenuity in exploring the ocean's unknown depths. Jules Verne died March 24, 1905.

I.--I Join a Strange Expedition

In the year 1866 the whole seafaring world of Europe and America was greatly disturbed by an ocean mystery which baffled the wits of scientists and sailors alike. Several vessels, in widely different regions of the seas, had met a long and rapidly moving object, much larger than a whale, and capable of almost incredible speed. It had also been seen at night, and was then phosphorescent, moving under the water in a glow of light.

There was no doubt whatever as to the reality of this unknown terror of the deep, for several vessels had been struck by it, and particularly the Cunard steamer Scotia, homeward bound for Liverpool. It had pierced a large triangular hole through the steel plates of the Scotia's hull, and would certainly have sunk the vessel had it not been divided into seven water-tight compartments, any one of which could stand injury without danger to the vessel. It was three hundred miles off Cape Clear that the Scotia encountered this mysterious monster. Arriving after some days' delay at Liverpool, the vessel was put into dock, when the result of the blow from the unknown was thoroughly investigated. So many vessels having recently been lost from unknown causes, the narrow escape of the Scotia directed fresh attention to this ocean mystery, and both in Europe and America there was a strong public agitation for an expedition to be sent out, prepared to do battle with, and if possible destroy, this narwhal of monstrous growth, as many scientists believed it to be.

Now I, Pierre Arronax, assistant professor in the Paris Museum of Natural History, was at this time in America, where I had been engaged on a scientific expedition into the disagreeable region of Nebraska. I had arrived at New York in company of my faithful attendant, Conseil, and was devoting my attention to classifying the numerous specimens I had gathered for the Paris Museum. As I had already some reputation in the scientific world from my book on "The Mysteries of the Great Submarine Grounds," a number of people did me the honour of consulting me concerning the one subject then exercising the minds of all interested in ocean travel.

An expedition was also being fitted out by the United States government, the fastest frigate of the navy, the Abraham Lincoln, under command of Captain Farragut, being in active preparation, with the object of hunting out this wandering monster which had last been seen three weeks before by a San Francisco steamer in the North Pacific Ocean. I was invited to join this expedition as a representative of France, and immediately decided to do so. The faithful Conseil said he would go with me wherever I went, and thus it came about that my sturdy Flemish companion, who had accompanied me on scientific expeditions for ten years was with me again on the eventful cruise which began when we sailed from

Brooklyn for the Pacific and the unknown.

The crew of the frigate and the various scientists on board were all eagerness to meet the great cetacean, or sea-unicorn. My own opinion was that it would be found to be a narwhal of monstrous growth, for these creatures are armed with a kind of ivory sword, or tusk, as hard as steel, and sometimes nearly seven feet long by fifteen inches in diameter at the base. Supposing one to exist ten times as large as any that had ever been captured, with its tusk proportionately powerful, it was conceivable that such a gigantic creature, moving at a great rate, could do all the damage that had been reported.

There was among our crew one Ned Land, a gigantic Canadian of forty, who was considered to be the prince of harpooners. Many a whale had received its deathblow from him, and he was eager to flesh his harpoon in this redoubtable cetacean which had terrified the marine world.

Week after week passed without any sign that our quest would be successful. Indeed, after nearly four months had gone, and we had explored the whole of the Japanese and Chinese coasts, the captain reached the point of deciding to return, when one night the voice of Ned Land was heard calling:

"Look out there! The thing we are looking for on our weather-beam!"

At this cry the entire crew rushed towards the harpooner--captain, officers, masters, sailors, and cabin-boys; even the engineers left their engines, and the stokers their furnaces. The frigate was now moving only by her own momentum, for the engines had been stopped.

My heart beat violently. I was sure the harpooner's eyes had not deceived him. Soon we could all see, about two cables' length away, a strange and luminous object, lying some fathoms below the surface, just as described in many of the reports. One of the officers suggested that it was merely an enormous mass of phosphorous particles, but I replied with conviction that the light was electric. And even as I spoke the strange thing began to move towards us!

The captain immediately reversed engines and put on full speed, but the luminous monster gained on us and played round the frigate with frightful rapidity. Its light would go out suddenly and reappear again on the other side of the vessel. It was clearly too great a risk to attack the thing in the dark, and by midnight it disappeared, dying out like a huge glow-worm. It appeared again, about five miles to the windward, at two in the morning, coming up to the surface as if to breathe, and it seemed as though the air rushed into its huge lungs like steam in the vast cylinders of a 2,000 horse-power engine.

"Hum!" said I. "A whale with the strength of a cavalry regiment would be a pretty whale!"

II.--The Attack and After

Everything was in readiness to attack with the coming of the dawn, and Ned Land was calmly sharpening his great harpoon, but by six in the morning the thing had again disappeared, and a thick sea-fog made it impossible to observe its further movements. At eight o'clock, however, the mist had begun to clear, and then, as suddenly as on the night before, Ned Land's voice was heard calling: "The thing on the port-quarter!"

There it was, surely enough, a mile and a half away, now a large black body showing above the waves, and leaving a track of dazzling white as its great tail beat the water into foam.

Moving rapidly, it approached within twenty feet of the frigate. Ned stood ready at the bow to hurl his harpoon, and the monster was now shining again with that strange light which dazzled our eyes. All at once he threw the harpoon. It struck on a hard body.

Instantly the light went out and two enormous water-spouts fell on our deck. A frightful shock followed, and the next moment I found myself struggling in the sea. Though a good swimmer, I kept afloat with some difficulty, and great was my joy when I heard the voice of the faithful Conseil, who had jumped in after me. Much stronger than myself, he helped me to remove some of my clothes, and thus we kept afloat until I fainted.

When I regained consciousness, I found myself on the top of what seemed to be a floating island, and there was Ned Land as well as Conseil. We were on the back of the mysterious monster, and it was made of metal! Presently it began to move, and we were afraid it might go below the surface.

Indeed, it seemed to be on the point of submerging, when Land hammered loudly on the metal plates, and in a moment an opening was made and the three of us were drawn inside by eight masked men. A door banged on us, and for half an hour we lay in utter darkness. Then a brilliant electric light flooded the cabin, a room of about twenty feet by ten, and two men entered. One was tall, pale, and dark-eyed, but magnificently proportioned.

Though we spoke to them in French, German, English, and Latin, they did not seem to understand, while their own speech was unintelligible to us. But they gave us clothes and food. After eating the food, which was strange but delicious, we all lay down and slept the sleep of sheer exhaustion.

Next day the tall man, whom I afterwards came to know as Captain Nemo, master of his marvellous submarine boat, came to me, and, speaking in French, said:

"I have been considering your case, and did not choose to speak till I had weighed it well. You have pursued me to destroy me. I have done with society for reasons of my own. I have decided. I give you choice of life or death. If you grant me a passive obedience, and submit to my consigning you to your cabin for some hours or days, as occasion calls, you are safe. You, Monsieur Arronax, have least cause to complain, for you have written on the life of the sea--I have your book in my library here--and will benefit most when I show you its marvels. I love it. It does not belong to despots."

Clearly we could do nothing but submit, and afterwards Captain Nemo showed me his wondrous craft.

III.--Our Life on the Nautilus

It was indeed a thing of marvels; for, besides the dining-room, it contained a large library of twelve thousand volumes, a drawing-room measuring thirty feet by eighteen, and fifteen high. The walls of this apartment were adorned with masterpieces of the great painters, and beautiful marbles and bronzes. A large piano-organ stood in one corner, and there were glass cases containing the rarest marine curiosities which a naturalist could wish to see. A collection of enormous pearls in a cabinet must have been worth millions, and Captain Nemo told me he had rifled every sea to find them.

The room assigned to me was fitted up with every luxury, yet the captain's own apartment was as simply furnished as a monastic cell, but in it were contained all the ingenious instruments that controlled the movements of the Nautilus, as his submarine was named. The electricity was manufactured by a process of extracting chloride of sodium from the sea-water, but the fresh air necessary for the life of the crew could only be obtained by rising to the surface. The engine-room was sixty-five feet long, and in it was the machinery for producing electricity as well as that for applying the power to the propeller.

The Nautilus, Captain Nemo explained, was capable of a speed of fifty miles an hour, and could be made to sink or rise with precision by flooding or emptying a reservoir. In a box, raised somewhat

above the hull and fitted with glass ten inches thick, the steersman had his place, and a powerful electric reflector behind him illumined the sea for half a mile in front.

The submarine also carried a small torpedo-like boat, fitted in a groove along the top, so that it could be entered from the Nautilus by opening a panel, and, after that was closed, the boat could be detached from the submarine, and would then bob upwards to the surface like a cork. The importance of this and its bearing on my story will appear in due time.

It was on a desert island that Captain Nemo had carried out the building of the Nautilus, and from many different places he had secured the various parts of the hull and machinery, in order to maintain secrecy.

Deeply interested as I was in every detail of this extraordinary vessel, and excited beyond measure at the wonders which awaited me in exploring the world beneath the waves, I had still the feeling of a prisoner who dared scarcely hope that liberty might some day be obtained. But when the metal plates which covered the windows of the saloon were rolled back as we sailed under the water, and on each hand I could see a thronging army of many-coloured aquatic creatures swimming around us, attracted by our light, I was in an ecstasy of wonder and delight.

Then days would pass without Captain Nemo putting in an appearance, and none of the crew were ever to be seen. But the Nautilus kept on its journey, which, I learned, took us to the Torres Strait, the Papuan coast, through the Red Sea, through a subterranean strait, under the Isthmus of Suez, to the island of Santorin, the Cretan Archipelago, to the South Pole, on whose sterile wastes Captain Nemo reared his black flag with a white "N" upon it, and through the Gulf Stream.

Of the wonders of the deep, those amazing and beautiful specimens of unknown life that passed before my vision on this strange journey, never before seen by the eye of any naturalist, I cannot here enter into particulars. But it must not be supposed, prisoners though we were, that we never emerged from the interior of the Nautilus.

One of my first surprises, indeed, was to be invited by Captain Nemo to accompany him on a hunting expedition in the marine forest that grew about the base of the little island of Crespo, in the North Pacific Ocean. We were told to make a hearty breakfast, as the jaunt would be a long one. This we did, for we had soon become accustomed to the strange food, every item of which was produced by the sea.

For our submarine excursion we were furnished with diving dresses of seamless india-rubber, fitted on the shoulders with a reservoir of stored air, its tubes opening into the great copper helmet. We even had powerful air-guns and electric bullets, which proved weapons of deadly precision. When inside our diving dresses, we could not move our feet on account of the enormous leaden soles, so that we had to be pushed into a compartment at the bottom of the vessel, and the iron doors secured behind us. Water was then pumped in, and we could feel it rising around us, until the compartment was full, when an outer door opened and we stepped on to the floor of the sea.

For some considerable distance we walked along sands of the most perfect smoothness, and then had to make our way over slimy rocks and treacherous masses of seaweed, before we reached the fairy-like forest under the sea, where all the branches of the marvellous growths ascended perpendicularly.

It was indeed a rare experience for me, who had written "The Mysteries of the Great Submarine Grounds," thus to see, at first hand, the life which I had only been able to speculate on before. We captured many rare specimens, and shot a fine sea-otter, the only known quadruped that inhabits the rocky depths of the Pacific. It was five feet long, and its skin was worth a hundred pounds.

IV.--Captain Nemo and the Avenger

So constantly was I enchanted with the wonders of our journey that day succeeded day without my taking note of them; but Captain Nemo, for all his kindness, still remained as mysterious as the Sphinx. One day he became violently agitated after looking through the glass at a point indicated by his lieutenant, and I and my companions were immediately imprisoned in darkness, as we had been when first taken into the Nautilus. When I awoke next morning the captain took me to see a wounded Englishman whose head had been shattered, and on my stating that the man could not live for two hours, the dark eyes of the captain seemed to fill with tears. I thought that night I heard sounds of a funeral hymn, and next day I was taken to a submarine forest of coral, where they buried the man. This was really a little cemetery beneath the sea, as I gathered from the coral cross which had been erected there. Ned Land, unlike me, was soon satisfied with what he had seen of the submarine world, and had now but one thought of escape. We were sailing up the eastern coast of South America, and by May 17 were some five hundred miles from Heart's Content. There I saw, at a depth of more than fifteen hundred fathoms, the great electric cable lying at the bottom of the ocean. The restlessness of poor Ned Land was at its height when he had a glimpse of the American shore; but Captain Nemo bent his course towards Ireland, and then southward, passing within sight of Land's End on May 30.

All the next day the vessel seemed to be making a series of circular movements, in some endeavour to locate a particular spot, and the captain was gloomier than I had ever seen him, having no word for me. The following day, which was beautifully clear, we could make out, some eight miles to the eastward, a large steam vessel flying no flag. Suddenly, after using his sextant, the captain exclaimed: "It is here!"

Presently the Nautilus sank to the bottom of the sea. When at rest the lights were put out and the sliding panels opened. We could now see on our starboard the remains of a sunken vessel, so encrusted with shells that it must have lain there a great many years. As I stood there wondering what might be Captain Nemo's reason for his manoeuvres, he came to my side and, speaking slowly, said:

"That was the Marseillais, launched in 1772. It carried seventy-four guns, and fought gallantly against the Preston, was in action again at the siege of Granada, and in Chesapeake Bay. Then in 1794 the French Republic changed the vessel's name, and it joined a squadron at Brest to escort a cargo of corn coming from America. The squadron fell in with an English man-o'-war, and seventy-two years ago to this very day, on this very spot, after fighting heroically, until its masts were shot away, its hold full of water, and a third of its crew disabled, this vessel preferred sinking, with its 356 sailors, to surrendering. Nailing its colours to the mast, it sank beneath the waves to the cry of 'Long live the Republic!'"

"The Avenger!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, the Avenger. A good name!" said the captain, with a strange seriousness, as he crossed his arms.

I was deeply impressed with his whole bearing while he recalled these facts. It was clearly no common spite against his fellow-men that had shut up Captain Nemo and his crew in the Nautilus.

Already we were ascending, fast leaving the grave of the old Avenger. When we had reached the surface we could see the other vessel steaming towards us. A low boom greeted the Nautilus as its upper part showed above the water. Ned Land, aflame once more with hope of escape, made out the vessel to be a two-decker ram, but she showed no flag at her mizzen. It seemed for a moment there might just be some chance of escape for us three prisoners, and Ned declared he would jump into the sea if the man-o'-war came within a mile of us. Just then another gun boomed out. She was firing at us.

It flashed across my mind at that moment that as those on board the Abraham Lincoln, having once seen the effect of Ned Land's harpoon when it struck the Nautilus, could not but have concluded their enemy was no monster of the deep--though indeed a monster of man's contriving--the warships of all

nations would now be on the look-out for the Nautilus, and we on board it could scarcely hope for mercy.

The shot rattled about us as we stood on the opened upper deck of the submarine, and Ned Land, in a mad moment, waved his handkerchief to the enemy, only to be instantly felled by the iron hand of Captain Nemo. Then, frightfully pale, the captain turned towards the approaching man-o'-war, and, in a voice terrible to hear, cried: "Ah, ship of an accursed nation, you know who I am! I do not need to see your colours to know you. Look, and see mine!"

So saying, he unfurled his black flag, and then sternly bade us go below, just as a shell struck the Nautilus, and rebounded into the sea. "You have seen the attack," he said calmly. "I shall sink yonder ship, but not here--no, not here. Her ruins shall not mingle with those of the Avenger."

V.--The Doom of the Oppressor

Having no choice but to obey, we all went below, and the propeller of the Nautilus was soon lashing the water into creamy foam, taking us beyond the range of fire. I held my peace for a time, but, after some deliberation, ventured to go up in the hope of dissuading Captain Nemo from more destruction. His vessel was now coursing round the other ship like a wild beast manoeuvring to attack its prey, and I had scarcely spoken when the captain turned on me fiercely, commanding silence.

"Here I am the law and the judge," he said, almost in a shriek. "There is the oppressor. Through him I have lost all that I have loved, cherished, and venerated--country, wife, children, father, and mother. I saw all perish! All that I hate is represented by that ship! Not another word!"

In the face of such fierce hatred it was useless to try persuasion. I and my companions resolved to attempt escape when the Nautilus made the attack. At six the next morning, being the second day of June, the two vessels were less than a mile and a half apart. Suddenly, as the three of us were preparing to rush on deck and jump overboard, the upper panel closed sharply. Our chance was gone!

Next moment the noise of the water rushing into the reservoir indicated that we were sinking, and in a moment more the machinery throbbed at its greatest speed as the Nautilus shot forward under the sea. Then the whole submarine trembled; there was a shock, and then a rending jar above. The terror of the seas had cut its way through the other vessel like a needle through sailcloth! Horror-stricken, I rushed into the saloon and found Captain Nemo, mute and gloomy, standing by the port panel, which had instantly been slid back, watching with a terrible satisfaction the injured vessel sinking with all its crew beneath the waves. The Nautilus sank with it, so that its terrible captain might lose nothing of the fascinating horror presented by the spectacle of his victims descending to their ocean grave. When we had seen all, he went to his room, and, following him, I saw on the wall the portraits of a woman, still young, and two little children. He looked at them, and as he stretched his arms toward them the fierce expression of hate died away from his face. He sank down on his knees, and burst into deep sobs. I felt a strange horror for this man, who, though he might have suffered terribly, had no right to exact so terrible a vengeance.

The Nautilus was now making its top speed, and the instruments indicated a northerly direction. Whither was it flying? That night we covered two hundred leagues of the Atlantic. Onward we kept our course, the speed never lessening, and for fifteen or twenty days, during which we prisoners never saw the captain or his lieutenant, this headlong race continued.

VI.--Our Escape from the Nautilus

Poor Ned Land was in despair, and Conseil and I had to watch him carefully lest he might kill himself. One morning he said to me:

"We are going to fly to-night. I have taken the reckoning, and make out that twenty miles or so to the east is land. I have got a little food and water, and Conseil and I will be near the opening into the small boat at ten. Meet us there. If we do not escape, they sha'n't take me alive."

"I will go with you," I said. "At least we can die together."

Wishing to verify the direction of the Nautilus, I went to the saloon. We were going N.N.E. with frightful speed at a depth of twenty-five fathoms. I took a last look at all the natural marvels and art treasures collected in this strange museum, a collection doomed to perish in the depths of the ocean with the man who had made it. Back in my own room I donned my sea garments, and placed all my notes carefully about my clothing. My heart was beating so loudly that I feared my agitation might betray me if I met Captain Nemo. I decided it was best to lie down on my bed in the hope of calming my nerves, and thus to pass the time till the hour determined upon for our attempt. Ten o'clock was on the point of striking, when I heard Captain Nemo playing a weird and sad melody, and I was struck with the sudden terror of having to pass through the saloon while he was there. I must make the attempt, and softly I crept to the door of the saloon and softly opened it. Captain Nemo was still playing his subdued melody; but the room was in darkness, and slowly I made my way across it to the library door. I had almost opened this when a sigh from him made me pause.

He had risen from the organ, and, as some rays of light were now admitted from the library, I could see him coming toward me with folded arms, gliding like a ghost rather than walking. His breast heaved with sobs, and I heard him murmur these words, the last of his I heard: "Enough! O God, enough!" Was it remorse escaping thus from the conscience of this mysterious being?

Had I not seen it begin with the tears in his eyes at the death of the Englishman whom he had buried in the coral cemetery, and who was doubtless a victim of one of his acts of destruction?

Now rendered desperate, I rushed into the library, up the central staircase, and so gained the opening to the boat where my companions were awaiting me. Quickly the panel through which we went was shut and bolted by means of a wrench which Ned Land had secured. The opening of the boat was also quickly fastened after we had got inside, and the harpooner had begun to undo from the inside the screws that still fastened the boat to the Nautilus. Suddenly a great noise was heard within the submarine. We thought we had been discovered, and were prepared to die defending ourselves. Ned Land stopped his work for the moment, and the noise grew louder. It was a terrible word, twenty times repeated, that we heard. "The Maelstrom! The Maelstrom!" was what they were crying. Was it to this, then, that the Nautilus had been driven, by accident or design, with such headlong speed? We heard a roaring noise, and could feel ourselves whirled in spiral circles. The steel muscles of the submarine were cracking, and at times in the awful churning of the whirlpool it seemed to stand on end. "We must hold on," cried Land, "and we may be saved if we can stick to the Nautilus."

His anxiety now was to make fast the screws that bound the boat to the submarine, but he had scarcely finished speaking when, with a great crash, the bolts gave way, and the boat shot up, released from the larger vessel, into the midst of the whirlpool. My head struck on its iron framework and with the violent shock I lost all consciousness.

How we escaped from that hideous gulf, where even whales of mighty strength have been tossed and battered to death, none of us will ever know! But I was in a fisherman's hut on the Lofoden Isles when I

regained consciousness. My two companions were by my side, safe and sound, and we all shook hands heartily. There we had to wait for the steamer that runs twice a month to Cape North, and in the interval I occupied myself revising this record of our incredible expedition in an element previously considered inaccessible to man, but to which progress will one day open up a way.

I may be believed or not, but I know that I have made a journey of twenty thousand leagues under the sea.

Does the Nautilus still exist? Is Captain Nemo still alive? Was that awful night in the Maelstrom his last, or is he still pursuing a terrible vengeance? Will the confessions of his life, which he told me he had written, and which the last survivor of his fellow-exiles was to cast into the sea in an air-tight case, ever be found?

This I know, that only two men could have a right to answer the question asked in the Ecclesiastes three thousand years ago: "That which is far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out?" These two men are Captain Nemo and I.

Source:

Verne, Jules. "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea." *World's Greatest Books, Volume 8*. Ed. Arthur Mee and J.A. Hammerton. 1910. Electronic.