

CAPTAIN NEMO
The Fantastic Adventures
Of a Dark Genius

by

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PROLOGUE

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Damp winter clung to northern France, but a fire warmed Jules Verne's writing study. Sultry smoke, orange light, and dreams.

Verne had composed many of his best stories in this isolated tower room, where narrow latticed windows looked out upon the leaden Amiens sky. The bleak view reminded him of the polar wastelands in Captain Hatteras, or the Icelandic volcano in A Journey to the Centre of the Earth. Though he chose not to venture far from his study, imagination had taken him to many places, both real and unreal.

Elms graced the flagstoned courtyard of the author's house on rue Charles-Dubois. Thick vines climbed the brick walls like ratlines on a sailing ship. How could he not think of the three-masted Coralie, on which a young and ambitious Jules had almost taken a voyage around the world?

Almost. At the last minute, Verne's stern father had snatched him from that real-life adventure, then punished him for "boyhood foolishness."

It had fallen to his friend André Nemo to go on the voyage without him. "A world of adventure is waiting for us," Nemo always said, imagining the excitement the two would experience. But he had been forced to do it all alone.

Though he was much older now, and wealthy because of his skill at crafting

fanciful extraordinary voyages, Verne knew in his marrow that nothing was holding him back anymore. He promised himself he would go out and see exotic lands and have exciting adventures, just like Nemo. One day.

At the age of 45, Jules Verne was a world-renowned writer, bursting with ideas and an ever-growing readership around the world. Persistent gray strands streaked his unruly reddish hair, and his long beard lent him the appearance of a wise philosopher. Often depicted in the French press, Verne had watched his fame grow with each successive novel. Lionized for his brilliant imagination, he was a man to whom the world turned for exotic, titillating thrills, a breadth of astonishing experiences that the average man could never hope to have.

And I deserve none of it.

His “inventiveness” was a sham. Nemo was the one who had experienced all the real adventures, survived the trials, explored the unknown. Verne was nothing more than an armchair adventurer, living a vicarious life through another man’s exploits.

No matter. Nemo wouldn’t want the applause or the fame anyway.

In the tower study, Verne’s maplewood shelves groaned with reference books, atlases, explorers’ journals, newspaper clippings -- information compiled by others, artifacts kept by a poseur. He had no other way to achieve verisimilitude in his fiction, and so far he hadn’t been caught. Verne had been everywhere on the planet, but only in his mind. His life was safer that way, after all -- more comfortable, and not so much of a bother.

Verne picked at the plate of strong camembert his quiet and frumpy wife had brought him hours earlier. He smeared the soft cheese on a piece of brown bread and ate, chewing slowly, deep in thought. Trying to concoct another story.

Nemo had once said to him, "There are two types of men in this world, Jules -- those who do things, and those who wish they did."

Oh, how Verne envied him . . . rhetorically speaking.

Ten years ago, his first novel, Five Weeks in a Balloon, had established him as a popular writer, and his subsequent "Extraordinary Voyages" had made him a fortune.

Despite the fame, Verne envied his old friend Nemo, the experiences he'd had, the opportunities he'd seized. Nemo had loved and lost, had come close to death countless times, had suffered tremendous hardships -- and triumphed. Such an exciting life . . . if one wanted that sort of thing. Nervous perspiration broke out on Verne's forehead. What is it about the man?

Verne had followed Five Weeks with A Journey to the Centre of the Earth, which explored exotic regions underground, and then Captain Hatteras about a dramatic quest for the North Pole. Next came From the Earth to the Moon, The Children of Captain Grant, and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, all published in the years before the Franco-Prussian War devastated the French countryside.

Ignoring the gray sleet and the skeletal elm branches outside his window, Verne added another length of wood to the fire. He closed the shutters, increasing the gloom in the study. There, better for concentration.

Downstairs, the family's big black dog barked, and his ten-year-old son, Michel, squealed. The rambunctious boy had an impish face, chestnut hair, and the soul of a demon. The dog barked again, and Michel shouted, chasing it around the house. Outside, when the regular train from Amiens to Paris clattered by, the engineer took malicious delight in tooting its whistle.

So much clamor and disruption was enough to drive a man mad.

Adventures enough for me, he thought.

The latest novel, Around the World in 80 Days, had taken Verne beyond success into genuine celebrity. Installments published in newspapers generated more excitement than actual news. Chapters were telegraphed around the globe; men made wagers as to whether the intrepid Phileas Fogg would succeed in his quest to circumnavigate the globe. Already, Verne had begun talks with a well-known playwright to create a stage production with real cannons and a live elephant. Very exciting.

It was yet another idea he owed to Nemo's real-life exploits.

What is it about the man?

Of all Verne's novels, the popular favorite by far remained the undersea adventure of the Nautilus and its enigmatic captain who had isolated himself from humanity, a man who had declared war on War itself. To Verne's surprise, the dark and mysterious villain had captured the public's imagination. Nemo, Nemo, Nemo! No one guessed the man was based on a real person.

Verne thought he'd ended Nemo's story by sinking the sub-marine boat in a maelstrom off Norway. The fictional Captain Nemo had perished in that vortex of waves, while the erstwhile Professor Aronnax, his manservant Conseil, and the harpooner Ned Land barely escaped with their lives.

Verne hadn't really believed Nemo would stay down, though -- not even after his literary death.

He pushed the tea and cheese away, then stared down at the thick ledger book in which he wrote his manuscript. This massive new novel would be a challenge to his heart as well as to his storytelling abilities.

Verne had never intended to write about his friend again. He had begun

this new novel, a shipwreck story, back in 1870 during the horrors of the Prussian war. Buildings had burned, and desperate citizens had eaten zoo animals and sewer rats just to stay alive. And in the midst of that turmoil Verne had lost his beloved Caroline forever.

But now, two years later, the world had returned to order. The trains ran on schedule, and once more Verne was expected to release his “Extraordinary Voyages” like clockwork.

He hated to reopen old wounds, but he would force himself to tell the rest of Nemo’s story. He knew the real André Nemo better than any man alive, the passions that drove him, the ordeals he faced. Future generations would remember Nemo’s life the way Verne chose to portray it, rather than what had actually transpired. He would concoct a fitting background for the dark captain. The “truth” posed no undue restrictions: Monsieur Verne was a fiction writer, after all.

He opened a fresh inkwell and dipped the sharp nib of his pen, then scratched the blackened tip across the paper. Beginning a new story, a long story: The Mysterious Island.

He could finally lay Captain Nemo to rest and then live his own life, seek out his own adventures. One of these days. . .

What is it about the man? Over the years, the jealousy had grown to rivalry, and then to something even darker.

The words began to flow, as they always did.