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CATSCAN 1 "Midnight on the Rue Jules Verne"

A kind of SF folk tradition surrounds the founding figure of Jules Verne. Everyone knows he was a big cheese back when the modern megalopolis of SFville was a 19th-century village. There's a bronze monument to him back in the old quarter of town, the Vieux Carre. You know, the part the French built, back before there were cars.

At midnight he stands there, somewhat the worse for the acid rain and the pigeons, his blind bronze eyes fixed on a future that has long since passed him by. SFville's citizenry pass him every day without a thought, their attention fixed on their daily grind in vast American high-rises; if they look up, they are intimidated by the beard, the grasped lapel, the flaking reek of Victorian obsolescence.

Everyone here knows a little about old Jules. The submarine, the moon cannon, the ridiculously sluggish eighty days. When they strip up the tarmac, you can still see the cobbles of the streets he laid. It's all still there, really, the village grid of SFville, where Verne lived and worked and argued scientific romance with the whippersnapper H.G. Wells. Those of us who walk these mean streets, and mutter of wrecking balls and the New Jerusalem, should take the time for a look back. Way back. Let's forget old Jules for the moment. What about young Jules?

Young Jules Verne was trouble. His father, a prosperous lawyer in the provincial city of Nantes, was gifted with the sort of son that makes parents despair. The elder Verne was a reactionary Catholic, given to frequent solitary orgies with the penitential scourge. He expected the same firm moral values in his heir.

Young Jules wanted none of this. It's sometimes mentioned in the SF folktale that Jules tried to run away to sea as a lad. The story goes that he was recaptured, punished, and contritely promised to travel henceforth "only in his imagination." It sounds cute. It was nothing of the kind. The truth of the matter is t

hat the eleven-year-old Jules resourcefully bribed a cabin-boy of his own age, and impersonated his way onto a French merchant cruiser bound for the Indies. In those days of child labor, the crew accepted Jules without hesitation. It was a mere fluke that a neighbor happened to spot Jules during his escape and informed against him. His father had to chase him down in a fast chartered steam-launch.

This evidence of mulishness seems to have thrown a scare into the Verne family, and in years to come they would treat Jules with caution. Young Jules never really broke with his parents, probably because they were an unfailing source of funds. Young Jules didn't much hold with wasting time on day-jobs. He was convinced that he was possessed of genius, despite the near-total lack of hard evidence.

During his teens and twenties, Jules fell for unobtainable women with the regularity of clockwork. Again and again he was turned down by middle-class nymphs whose parents correctly assessed him as an art nut and spoiled ne'er-do-well.

Under the flimsy pretext of studying law, Jules managed to escape to Paris. He had seen the last of stuffy provincial France, or so he assumed: "Well," he wrote to a friend, "I'm leaving at last, as I wasn't wanted here, but one day they'll see what stuff he was made of, that poor young man they knew as Jules Verne."

The "poor young man" rented a Parisian garret with his unfailing parental stipend. He soon fell in with bad company--namely, the pop-thriller writer Alexandre Dumas Pere (author of *Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Three Musketeers*, about a million others). Jules took readily to the role of declasse' intellectual and professional student. During the Revolution of 1848 he passed out radical political pamphlets on Paris streetcorners. At night, embittered by female rejection, he wrote sarcastic sonnets on the perfidy of womankind. Until, that is, he had his first affair with an obliging housemaid, one of Dumas' legion of literary groupies. After this

, young Jules loosened up to the point of moral collapse and was soon, by his own admission, a familiar figure in all the best whorehouses in Paris.

This went on for years. Young Jules busied himself writing poetry and plays. He became a kind of gofer for Dumas, devoting vast amounts of energy to a Dumas playhouse that went broke. (Dumas had no head for finance--he kept his money in a baptismal font in the entryway of his house and would stuff handfuls into his pockets whenever going out.)

A few of Jules' briefer pieces--a domestic farce, an operetta--were produced, to general critical and popular disinterest. During these misspent years Jules wrote dozens of full-length plays, most of them never produced or even published, in much the vein of would-be Hollywood scriptwriters today. Eventually, having worked his way into the theatrical infrastructure through dint of prolonged and

determined hanging-out, Jules got a production job in another playhouse, for no salary to speak of. He regarded this as his big break, and crowed vastly to his family in cheerful letters that made fun of the Pope.

Jules moved in a fast circle. He started a literary-artistic group of similar souls, a clique appropriately known as the Eleven Without Women. Eventually one of the Eleven succumbed, and invited Jules to the wedding. Jules fell immediately for the bride's sister, a widow with two small daughters. She accepted his proposal. (Given Jules' record, it is to be presumed that she took what she could get.)

Jules was now married, and his relentlessly unimaginative wife did what she could to break him to middle-class harness. Jules' new brother-in-law was doing okay in the stock market, so Jules figured he would give it a try. He extorted a big loan from his despairing father and bought a position on the Bourse. He soon earned a reputation among his fellow brokers as a cut-up and general weird duck. He didn't manage to go broke, but a daguerreotype of the period shows his mood. The extended Verne

family sits stiffly before the camera. Jules is the one in the back, his face in a clown's grimace, his arm blurred as he waves wildly in a brokerage floor "buy" signal.

Denied his longed-for position in the theater, Jules groaningly decided that he might condescend to try prose. He wrote a couple of stories heavily influenced by Poe, a big period favorite of French intellectuals. There was a cheapo publisher in town who was starting a kid's pop-science magazine called "Family Museum." Jules wrote a couple of pieces for peanuts and got cover billing. The publisher decided to try him out on books. Jules was willing. He signed a contract to do two books a year, more or less forever, in exchange for a monthly sum.

Jules, who liked hobnobbing with explorers and scientists, happened to know a local deranged techie called Nadar. Nadar's real name was Felix Tournachon, but everybody called him Nadar, for he was one of those period Gallic swashbucklers who passed through life with great swirlings of scarlet and purple and the scent of attar of roses. Nadar was involved in two breaking high-tech developments of the period: photography and ballooning. (Nadar is perhaps best remembered today as the father of aerial photography.)

Nadar had Big Ideas. Jules' real forte was geography--a date-line or a geodesic sent him into raptures--but he liked Nadar's style and knew good copy when he saw it. Jules helped out behind the

scenes when Nadar launched THE GIANT, the largest balloon ever seen at the time, with a gondola the size of a two-story house, lavishly supplied with champagne. Jules never rode the thing--he had a wife and kids now--but he retired into his study with the plot-line of his first book, and drove his wife to distraction. "There are manuscripts everywhere--nothing but manuscripts," she said in a fine burst of wifely confidence. "Let's hope they don't end up under the cooking pot."

Five Weeks In A Balloon was Jules' first hit. The thing was a smash for his publisher, who

sold it all over the world in lavish foreign editions for which Jules received pittances. But Jules wasn't complaining--probably because he wasn't paying attention.

With a firm toehold in the public eye, Jules soon hit his stride as a popular author. He announced to the startled stockbrokers: "Mes enfants, I am leaving you. I have had an idea, the sort of idea that should make a man's fortune. I have just written a novel in a new form, one that's entirely my own. If it succeeds, I shall have stumbled upon a gold mine. In that case, I shall go on writing and writing without pause, while you others go on buying shares the day before they drop and selling them the day before they rise. I am leaving the Bourse. Good evening, mes enfants."

Jules Verne had invented hard science fiction. He originated the hard SF metier of off-the-rack plots and characters, combined with vast expository lumps of pop science. His innovation came from literary naivete; he never learned better or felt any reason to. (This despite Apollinaire's sniping remark: "What a style Jules Verne has, nothing but nouns.")

Verne's dialogue, considered quite snappy for the period, was derived from the stage. His characters constantly strike dramatic poses: Ned Land with harpoon upraised, Phileas Fogg reappearing stage-right in his London club at the last possible tick of the clock. The minor characters--comic Scots, Russians, Jews--are all stage dialect and glued-on beards, instantly recognizable to period readers, yet fresh because of cross-genre effects. They brought a proto-cinematic flash to readers used to the gluey, soulful character studies of, say, Stendhal.

The books we remember, the books determined people still occasionally read, are products of Verne in his thirties and forties. (His first novel was written at thirty-five.) In these early books, flashes of young Jules' student radicalism periodically

surface for air, much like the Nautilus. The character of Captain Nemo, for instance, is often linked

to

novelistic conventions of the Byronic hero. Nemo is, in fact, a democratic terrorist of the period of '48, the year when the working-class flung up Paris barricades, and, during a few weeks of brief civil war, managed to kill off more French army officers than were lost in the entire Napoleonic campaigns. The uprising was squelched, but Jules' generation of Paris '48, like that of May '68, never truly forgot.

Jules did okay by his "new form of the novel." He eventually became quite wealthy, though not through publishing, but the theater. (Nowadays it would be movie rights, but the principle still stands.) Jules, incidentally, did not write the stage versions of his own books; they were done by professional theater hacks. Jules knew the plays stank, and that they travestied his books, but they made him a fortune. The theatrical version of his mainstream smash, *Michael Strogoff*, included such lavish special effects as a live elephant on stage. It was so successful that the term "Strogoff" became contemporary Paris slang for anything wildly bravissimo.

Fortified with fame and money, Jules lunged against the traces. He travelled to America and Scandinavia, faithfully toting his notebooks. He bought three increasingly lavish yachts, and took to sea for days at a time, where he would lie on his stomach scribbling *Twenty Thousand Leagues* against the deck.

During the height of his popularity, he collected his family and sailed his yacht to North Africa, where he had a grand time and a thrilling brush with guntoting Libyans. On the way back, he toured Italy, where the populace turned out to greet him with fireworks and speeches. In Rome, the Pope received him and praised his books because they weren't smutty. His wife, who was terrified of drowning, refused to get on the boat again, and eventually Verne sold it.

At his wife's insistence, Jules moved to the provincial town of Amiens, where she had relatives. Downstairs, Mme. Verne courted local society in drawing rooms crammed

with Second Empire bric-a-brac, while Jules isolated himself upstairs in a spartan study worthy of Nemo, its wall lined with wooden cubbyholes full of carefully labeled index-cards. They slept in separate bedrooms, and rumor says Jules had a mistress in Paris, where he often vanished for weeks.

Jules' son Michel grew up to be a holy terror, visiting upon Jules all the accumulated karma of his own lack of filial piety. The teenage Michel was in trouble with cops, was confined in an asylum, was even banished onto a naval voyage. Michel ended up producing silent films, not very successfully. Jules' stepdaughters made middle-class marriages and vanished into straitlaced Catholic domesticity, where they cooked up family feuds against their scapegrace half-brother.

Verne's work is marked by an obsession with desert islands. Mysterious Isles, secret hollow volcanoes in the mid-Atlantic, vast ice-floes that crack off and head for the North Pole. Verne never really made it into the bosom of society. He did his best, and played the part whenever onstage, but one senses that he knew somehow that he was Not Like The Others and might be torn to pieces if his facade cracked. One notes his longing for the freedom of empty seas and skies, for a submarine full of books that can sink below storm level into eternal calm, for the hollow shell fired into the pristine unpeopled emptiness of circumlunar space.

From within his index-card lighthouse, the isolation began to tell on the aging Jules. He had now streamlined the production of novels to industrial assembly-work, so much so that lying gossip claimed he used a troop of ghostwriters. He could field-strip a Verne book blindfolded, with a greased slot for every part--the daffy scientist, the comic muscleman or acrobat, the ordinary Joe who asks all the wide-eyed questions, the woman who scarcely exists and is rescued from suttee or sharks or red Indians. Sometimes the machine is the hero--the steam-driven elephant, the flying war-machine, th

e gigantic raft--
sometimes the geography: caverns, coal-mines, ice-floes, darkest Africa.

Bored, Jules entered politics, and joined the Amiens City Council, where he was quickly shuffled onto the cultural committee. It was a natural sinecure and he did a fair job, getting electric lights installed, widening a few streets, building a municipal theater that everyone admired and no one attended. His book sales slumped steadily. The woods were full of guys writing scientific romances by now--people who actually knew how to write novels, like Herbert Wells. The folk-myth quotes Verne on Wells' First Men In The Moon: "Where is this gravity-repelling metal? Let him show it to me." If not the earliest, it is certainly the most famous exemplar of the hard-SF writer's eternal plaint against the

fantasist.

The last years were painful. A deranged nephew shot Verne in the foot, crippling him; it was at this time that he wrote one of his rare late poems, the "Sonnet to Morphine." He was to have a more than nodding acquaintance with this substance, though in those days of children's teething-*laudanum* no one thought much of it. He died at seventy-seven in the bosom of his vigorously quarrelling family, shriven by the Church. Everyone who had forgotten about him wrote obits saying what a fine fellow he was. This is the Verne everyone thinks that they remember: the greybearded *paterfamilias*, the conservative Catholic hardware-nut, the guy who made technical forecasts that Really Came True if you squint real hard and ignore most of his work.

Jules Verne never knew he was "inventing science fiction," in the felicitous phrase of Peter Costello's insightful 1978 biography. He knew he was on to something hot, but he stepped onto a commercial treadmill that he didn't understand, and the money and the fame got to him. The early artistic failures, the romantic rejections, had softened him up, and when the public finally Recognized His Genius he was grateful, and fell into line with their wishes.

Jules had rejected respectability early on, when it was offered to him on a plate. But when he had earned it on his own, everyone around him swore that respectability was dandy, and he didn't dare face them down. Wanting the moon, he ended up with a hatch-battered one-man submarine in an upstairs room. Somewhere along the line his goals were lost, and he fell into a role his father might almost have picked for him: a well-to-do provincial city councilman. The garlands disguised the reins, and the streetcorner radical with a headful of visions became a dusty pillar of society.

This is not what the world calls a tragedy; nor is it any small thing to have books in print after 125 years. But the path Young Jules blazed, and the path Old Jules was gently led down, are still well-trampled streets here in SFville. If you stand by his statue at midnight, you can still see Old Jules limping home, over the cobblestones. Or so they say.