

MASTER OF THE WORLD

JULES
VERNE

Introduction by Robert A. W. Lowndes



COMPLETE
AND UNABRIDGED

MASTER OF THE WORLD

JULES VERNE



AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

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ISBN: 0-8049-0073-6 MASTER OF THE WORLD

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JULES VERNE

Introduction

The year 1828 was an unsettled and unsettling one in Europe and America. In the United States, the old Federalist Party was fighting a losing battle against the popular forces that surrounded Andrew Jackson, as President John Quincy Adams' administration drew to a close. In England, conservative forces drew around the Duke of Wellington, who became Prime Minister under George IV. In France, the uneasy reign of Charles X had but two more years to run, before a revolution would upset the restored monarchy. But it was in France that the most memorable event of this year occurred; on February 8, 1828, a son was born to a distinguished lawyer in Nantes, one M. Verne; the boy was named Jules, and his name would become known throughout the world, wherever people read tales of wonder.

There was no question in the mind of M. Verne as to what vocation his son would pursue; he would distinguish himself in the law as his father had, and the boy duly underwent the rigorous training that was required. That

this was by no means an entire waste is shown in the self-discipline and strict adherence to logic that he would display even in his most fanciful flights of imagination. But although he was fully prepared, Jules Verne managed to evade actual practice of law.

He turned first to writing plays, several of which were produced; he wrote two opera librettos in collaboration with Michel Carré; he collaborated with Alexandre Dumas *fils* on a humorous verse comedy. It would seem, then, that he had literary gifts; yet he reached the age of thirty-five without any particular recognition as a writer, and the only success with which he could credit himself was the dubious one of not becoming a lawyer.

Like many other fathers in similar situations, M. Verne was not convinced that his son had any substantial literary talent. Unlike such other fathers, he was willing to be convinced; and the breakthrough came when he read Jules's short story *Master Zacharius*, which was published in 1852. This story, known in America as *The Watch's Soul*, contained two of the basic elements that would appear in Verne's work throughout his career: the transformations that the development of science would bring about in the world, and in human progress, and the complementary rather than the conflicting effect of science and religion upon each other. The elder Verne was devoutly religious, as well as logical-minded; he was impressed and delighted, and proceeded to subsidize his son's career in letters.

An author has no more choice of his biological parents than anyone else; but he can choose his literary forebears, and Jules Verne's adopted father in literature was Edgar Allan Poe. It was in this same year, 1852, that the greatest French poet of the century, Charles Baudelaire, published an essay upon the neglected American author, and started to translate Poe's tales of imagination. The success of these translations was immediate and enduring; long

before Poe had any reputation in America as a master of fiction, being remembered only for poetry, he became the rage of literate France as an author of superb tales. He appealed to the French love for precision and logic; and while Verne read everything by the American author that he could get hold of, avidly and repeatedly, he was most impressed by Poe's scientific romances.

Yet there were disturbing elements in Poe, from Verne's viewpoint. He was offended by what he considered the American's willingness to invent physical laws, and by Poe's materialism. It seemed to him that Poe manufactured science for no other purpose than to avoid any sort of religious or supernatural explanation for the uncanny events he described. And the irony is that Edgar Allan Poe, a materialist, is best known for his tales of the supernatural; while Jules Verne, a convinced Catholic, has no supernatural elements in his stories. Verne believes in God, but expresses his belief in divine Providence through reason and explorations of the wonders of a logical and orderly universe, where science is the key to greater understanding of reality and of human progress.

From Poe, then, Jules Verne selected the precision of scientific detail as his standard; and in 1862 Hetzel's *Magazin d'Éducation* published *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, the beginning of the series of "imaginary voyages" which he would continue for the rest of his life. Among the best known are *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (Airmont 1965), which first appeared in 1864, *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1869) (Airmont 1963), and *Around the World in 80 Days* (1872) (Airmont 1963).

Less well known is *Robur the Conqueror*, which appeared in 1886, and this is rather strange as *Robur* is among the relatively few Verne novels which are genuinely prophetic. The best known are, indeed, full of invention;

but the notion of a hollow world inside the Earth can be traced in literature back to the 18th century; he did not invent the rocket principle; nor was the notion of the submarine original with him. But Robur builds a heavier-than-air craft of plastics (for combined lightness and strength); he combines the airplane and helicopter in his *Albatross*, and demonstrates the superiority of his craft over the dirigible. It would be nearly fifty years before the world was convinced that Verne-Robur was right, and the lighter-than-air craft finally abandoned except for very minor uses, so far as transportation is concerned.

Verne did not write scientific romances exclusively; two of his most popular novels, *Around the World in 80 Days* and *Michael Strogoff*, can hardly be considered science fiction; they are adventure-travel novels, written with the same detail and logic that we find in his science fiction. For a considerable period, Verne wrote adventure stories wherein scientific invention or prophecy can only be considered a spear carrier. Then, in 1904, the year before his death, *The Master of the World* appeared.

The mystery begins in North Carolina, amid the Blue Ridge Mountains, in the crest known as the Great Eyrie. Tremors are felt; strange noises are heard; lights and smoke are seen. People wonder if the mountain harbors a volcano which is about to come to life. Scientific experts doubt it; there is no evidence that the necessary elements for volcanic activity are present in these mountains. An investigator named John Strock tries to climb the Great Eyrie and explore the crater, but fails.

A few weeks later, the Automobile Club has a meeting in Pennsylvania, and a race is in progress. Suddenly, a tremendous noise is heard; a cloud of dust is seen—*something* sweeps by all the motorcars on the road like a hurricane. No one can tell what it is, but its speed is estimated at no less than one hundred fifty miles an hour—perhaps more; fantastic!

Nothing further is heard of the strange machine; then reports come that the waters along the coast of Maine, Massachusetts, and Connecticut have been the scene of a weird appearance. A cigar-shaped body, moving at great speed, is observed; motorboats and steam launches try to approach it, then to pursue it—all in vain. And later, a strange submarine vessel appears in a lake.

John Strock and his superior ponder and ask the same question that the government asks: are these three *the same machine*? And Strock wonders if the events at Great Eyrie also involve the same machine—which would have to be a flying machine, too, in order to escape from the crater. The United States Government offers a large sum to the inventor of the machine. Other governments raise the sum; there is sharp bidding, but finally the United States makes an offer that the others decline to top. Then comes a letter.

It emanates from "On Board the 'Terror'" and is addressed "To the Old and New World." The writer declines all offers from all governments, saying that the invention will remain with him. "With it," he says, "I hold control of the entire world . . ." He concludes: "Let both the Old and the New World realize this: They can accomplish nothing against me; I can accomplish anything against them." The letter is signed, "The Master of the World."

Who is this unknown inventor? What does he plan to do with this marvelous machine which can travel on land and sea, in the air, and below the sea? What other strange devices has he perfected? What does he plan? John Strock and two companions set out to find and capture "The Master of the World."

Jules Verne has long been regarded as one of the fathers of science fiction. A great deal depends, of course, upon how one defines science fiction; and on this matter there is neither an end to arguments nor any general

agreement upon a precise definition. Yet, he is certainly the father of the type of science fiction which Hugo Gernsback sought to make not only popular but a permanent part of American letters when he issued *Amazing Stories* magazine in 1926.

Gernsback coined the term "scientifiction" (a word which many considered a monstrosity and which, for better or worse, has disappeared) and defined it thus in his editorial for the initial issue of *Amazing Stories*. "By 'scientifiction' I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision."

Now this is a most *imprecise* definition. Gernsback, as his other writings indicate, wanted stories written with the Verne precision of detail, with the Verne care in building on scientific fact and reasonable theory alone, with the Verne horror of "invented" scientific principles, and with the Verne concentration upon story and prophecy, rather than grinding social, political, cultural, or economic axes. But note that Poe did not hesitate to invent his science, and for the purpose of grinding his anti-religious axe at that; and note that Wells does not hesitate, as Basil Davenport puts it, to "flim-flam" the reader with scientific-sounding nonsense or little better than magic—for the sake of getting his characters where he wants them to go, and often for the larger purpose of grinding social and political axes.

Although Verne himself faltered at times, his best works remain "pure" science fiction in the Gernsback sense. It makes no difference that events have not followed all his fiction, or that an occasional impossibility had to be allowed; no science fiction at all could be written otherwise. He epitomizes the 19th century's faith in science and progress, the belief that advances in invention and technique, the spread of education, etc., would result in, if not Utopia, a world of peace and

order, where most evils arising from human ills had disappeared forever.

Like Wells, he lived to see these dreams go sour; although he did not see the Great War of 1914-1918, Verne lived long enough to realize that scientific progress alone did not make for a good world. He saw that science was a tool which could be used wisely or foolishly, for construction or destruction, and that for the most part the greatest inventions were being put to immediate and selfish profit rather than the good of mankind. *The Master of the World* reflects the bitterness of Verne's last years; for where, in the first story, Robur seeks to offer his inventions to the world (which doesn't want them), in the sequel the world is overeager, but the inventor has no faith in the uses to which his wonderful machine will be put. No longer will he share his secrets, and his letter to the governments indicates that he plans to force wisdom and goodness upon the world through his *Terror*.

Nevertheless, even this next-to-last tale has the elements of the earlier stories that make Jules Verne an enduring pleasure to read: the mystery, the verve, the good-natured caricatures of national types and follies, the logic, and the ingenuity. Although he was never enrolled among the members of the French Academy, several of Verne's romances were honored by them; and he himself became a member of the Legion of Honor. He died in Amiens on March 24, 1905, and a sketch of his tombstone—which shows him raising the lid—graced the contents page of Gernsback's publication during the period of his editorship and for several years thereafter. It makes a fine symbol, for the wonderful tales of Jules Verne will continue to fascinate readers so long as wonder remains a part of human nature.

—Robert A. W. Lowndes

chapter 1 What Happened in the Mountains

IF I speak of myself in this story, it is because I have been deeply involved in its startling events, events doubtless among the most extraordinary which this twentieth century will witness. Sometimes I even ask myself if all this has really happened, if its pictures dwell in truth in my memory, and not merely in my imagination. In my position as head inspector in the federal police department at Washington, urged on moreover by the desire, which has always been very strong in me, to investigate and understand everything which is mysterious, I naturally became much interested in these remarkable occurrences. And as I have been employed by the government in various important affairs and secret missions since I was a mere lad, it also happened very naturally that the head of my department placed in my charge this astonishing investigation, wherein I found myself wrestling with so many impenetrable mysteries.

In the remarkable passages of the recital, it is important that you should believe my word. For some of the facts I can bring no other testimony than my own. If you do not wish to believe me, so be it. I can scarce believe it all myself.

The strange occurrences began in the western part of our great American State of North Carolina. There, deep amid the Blue-ridge Mountains rises the crest called the Great Eyrie. Its huge rounded form is distinctly seen from the little town of Morganton on the Catawba River, and still more clearly as one approaches the mountains by way of the village of Pleasant Garden.

Why the name of Great Eyrie was originally given this mountain by the people of the surrounding region, I am not quite sure. It rises rocky and grim and inaccessible, and under certain atmospheric conditions has a peculiarly blue and distant effect. But the idea one would naturally

get from the name is of a refuge for birds of prey, eagles, condors, vultures; the home of vast numbers of the feathered tribes, wheeling and screaming above the peaks beyond the reach of man. Now, the Great Eyrie did not seem particularly attractive to birds; on the contrary, the people of the neighborhood began to remark that on some days when birds approached its summit they mounted still further, circled high above the crest, and then flew swiftly away, troubling the air with harsh cries.

Why then the name Great Eyrie? Perhaps the mount might better have been called a crater, for in the center of those steep and rounded walls there might well be a huge, deep basin. Perhaps there might even lie within their circuit a mountain lake, such as exists in other parts of the Appalachian mountain system, a lagoon fed by the rain and the winter snows.

In brief was not this the site of an ancient volcano, one which had slept through ages, but whose inner fires might yet reawake? Might not the Great Eyrie reproduce in its neighborhood the violence of Mount Krakatoa or the terrible disaster of Mont Peleé? If there were indeed a central lake, was there not danger that its waters, penetrating the strata beneath, would be turned to steam by the volcanic fires and tear their way forth in a tremendous explosion, deluging the fair plains of Carolina with an eruption such as that of 1902 in Martinique?

Indeed, with regard to this last possibility there had been certain symptoms recently observed which might well be due to volcanic action. Smoke had floated above the mountain and once the country folk passing near had heard subterranean noises, unexplainable rumblings. A glow in the sky had crowned the height at night.

When the wind blew the smoky cloud eastward toward Pleasant Garden, a few cinders and ashes drifted down from it. And finally one stormy night pale flames, reflected from the clouds above the summit, cast upon the district below a sinister, warning light.

In presence of these strange phenomena, it is not astonishing that the people of the surrounding district became seriously disquieted. And to the disquiet was joined an imperious need of knowing the true condition of the mountain. The Carolina newspapers had flaring headlines, "The Mystery of the Great Eyrie!" They asked if it was

not dangerous to dwell in such a region. Their articles aroused curiosity and fear—curiosity among those who being in no danger themselves were interested in the disturbance merely as a strange phenomenon of nature, fear in those who were likely to be the victims if a catastrophe actually occurred. Those more immediately threatened were the citizens of Morganton, and even more the good folk of Pleasant Garden and the hamlets and farms yet closer to the mountain.

Assuredly it was regrettable that mountain climbers had not previously attempted to ascend to the summit of the Great Eyrie. The cliffs of rock which surrounded it had never been scaled. Perhaps they might offer no path by which even the most daring climber could penetrate to the interior. Yet, if a volcanic eruption menaced all the western region of the Carolinas, then a complete examination of the mountain was become absolutely necessary.

Now before the actual ascent of the crater, with its many serious difficulties, was attempted, there was one way which offered an opportunity of reconnoitering the interior, without clambering up the precipices. In the first days of September of that memorable year, a well-known aeronaut named Wilker came to Morganton, with his balloon. By waiting for a breeze from the east, he could easily rise in his balloon and drift over the Great Eyrie. There from a safe height above he could search with a powerful glass into its depths. Thus he would know if the mouth of a volcano really opened amid the mighty rocks. This was the principal question. If this were settled, it would be known if the surrounding country must fear an eruption at some period more or less distant.

The ascension was begun according to the programme suggested. The wind was fair and steady; the sky clear; the morning clouds were disappearing under the vigorous rays of the sun. If the interior of the Great Eyrie was not filled with smoke, the aeronaut would be able to search with his glass its entire extent. If the vapors were rising, he, no doubt, could detect their source.

The balloon rose at once to a height of fifteen hundred feet, and there rested almost motionless for a quarter of an hour. Evidently the east wind, which was brisk upon the surface of the earth, did not make itself felt at that

height. Then, unlucky chance, the balloon was caught in an adverse current, and began to drift toward the east. Its distance from the mountain chain rapidly increased. Despite all the efforts of the aeronaut, the citizens of Morganton saw the balloon disappear on the wrong horizon. Later, they learned that it had landed in the neighborhood of Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina.

This attempt having failed, it was agreed that it should be tried again under better conditions. Indeed, fresh rumblings were heard from the mountain, accompanied by heavy clouds and wavering glimmerings of light at night. Folk began to realize that the Great Eyrie was a serious and perhaps imminent source of danger. Yes, the entire country lay under the threat of some seismic or volcanic disaster.

During the first days of April of that year, these more or less vague apprehensions turned to actual panic. The newspapers gave prompt echo to the public terror. The entire district between the mountains and Morganton was sure that an eruption was at hand.

The night of the fourth of April, the good folk of Pleasant Garden were awakened by a sudden uproar. They thought that the mountains were falling upon them. They rushed from their houses, ready for instant flight, fearing to see open before them some immense abyss, engulfing the farms and villages for miles around.

The night was very dark. A weight of heavy clouds pressed down upon the plain. Even had it been day the crest of the mountains would have been invisible.

In the midst of this impenetrable obscurity, there was no response to the cries which arose from every side. Frightened groups of men, women, and children groped their way along the black roads in wild confusion. From every quarter came the screaming voices: "It is an earthquake!" "It is an eruption!" "Whence comes it?" "From the Great Eyrie!"

Into Morganton sped the news that stones, lava, ashes, were raining down upon the country.

Shrewd citizens of the town, however, observed that if there were an eruption the noise would have continued and increased, the flames would have appeared above the crater; or at least their lurid reflections would have pene-

trated the clouds. Now, even these reflections were no longer seen. If there had been an earthquake, the terrified people saw that at least their houses had not crumbled beneath the shock. It was possible that the uproar had been caused by an avalanche, the fall of some mighty rock from the summit of the mountains.

An hour passed without other incident. A wind from the west sweeping over the long chain of the Blue Ridge, set the pines and hemlocks wailing on the higher slopes. There seemed no new cause for panic; and folk began to return to their houses. All, however, awaited impatiently the return of day.

Then suddenly, toward three o'clock in the morning, another alarm! Flames leaped up above the rocky wall of the Great Eyrie. Reflected from the clouds, they illuminated the atmosphere for a great distance. A crackling, as if of many burning trees, was heard.

Had a fire spontaneously broken out? And to what cause was it due? Lightning could not have started the conflagration; for no thunder had been heard. True, there was plenty of material for fire; at this height the chain of the Blue Ridge is well wooded. But these flames were too sudden for any ordinary cause.

"An eruption!" "An eruption!"

The cry resounded from all sides. An eruption! The Great Eyrie was then indeed the crater of a volcano buried in the bowels of the mountains. And after so many years, so many ages even, had it reawakened? Added to the flames, was a rain of stones and ashes about to follow? Were the lavas going to pour down torrents of molten fire, destroying everything in their passage, annihilating the towns, the villages, the farms, all this beautiful world of meadows, fields and forests, even as far as Pleasant Garden and Morganton?

This time the panic was overwhelming; nothing could stop it. Women carrying their infants, crazed with terror, rushed along the eastward roads. Men, deserting their homes, made hurried bundles of their most precious belongings and set free their livestock, cows, sheep, pigs, which fled in all directions. What disorder resulted from this agglomeration, human and animal, under darkest night, amid forests, threatened by the fires of the volcano,

along the border of marshes whose waters might be upheaved and overflow! With the earth itself threatening to disappear from under the feet of the fugitives! Would they be in time to save themselves, if a cascade of glowing lava came rolling down the slope of the mountain across their route?

Nevertheless, some of the chief and shrewder farm owners were not swept away in this mad flight, which they did their best to restrain. Venturing within a mile of the mountain, they saw that the glare of the flames was decreasing. In truth it hardly seemed that the region was immediately menaced by any further upheaval. No stones were being hurled into space; no torrent of lava was visible upon the slopes; no rumblings rose from the ground. There was no further manifestation of any seismic disturbance capable of overwhelming the land.

At length, the flight of the fugitives ceased at a distance where they seemed secure from all danger. Then a few ventured back toward the mountain. Some farms were reoccupied before the break of day.

By morning the crests of the Great Eyrie showed scarcely the least remnant of its cloud of smoke. The fires were certainly at an end; and if it were impossible to determine their cause, one might at least hope that they would not break out again.

It appeared possible that the Great Eyrie had not really been the theater of volcanic phenomena at all. There was no further evidence that the neighborhood was at the mercy either of eruptions or of earthquakes.

Yet once more about five o'clock, from beneath the ridge of the mountain, where the shadows of night still lingered, a strange noise swept across the air, a sort of whirring, accompanied by the beating of mighty wings. And had it been a clear day, perhaps the farmers would have seen the passage of a mighty bird of prey, some monster of the skies, which having risen from the Great Eyrie sped away toward the east.