

Inside flap

Jules Verne (1828–1905) is one of the world's most translated and published writers. With *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, and *Around the World in Eighty Days*, the Frenchman has reshaped modern literature. He dominates the box office and pervades our life and culture.

But behind all the success lay a complex man: a plagiarist, a social misfit, then a provincial recluse. Now at last comes an authoritative biography worthy of this controversial figure. Hongkonger William Butcher is the most cited specialist on Verne. His countless articles and books have revolutionised understanding of this multi-faceted writer.

Dr Butcher combines ground-breaking research on Verne's childhood and bohemian decades with the revelation of both his first book and an unknown contemporary biography. His deciphering of the manuscripts leads to exclusive information about the novels before Hetzel rewrote them and cut the sex, violence, and politics.

Jules Verne details the novelist's money woes and amorous escapades, Scottish ancestry and right-wing connections, near-murder and court cases. This erudite page-turner exposes the man inside the legend.

Reactions to Jules Verne

"Verne gave us the earth and the moon. Now Butcher gives us the real Verne", Ray Bradbury

"Radiates fascination", *Booklist*

"Gorgeously written and full of valuable new detail", Frederick Paul Walter

"The best modern biography of Verne", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

"Far surpass[es] previous efforts", Prof. Arthur B. Evans

"A fascinating portrait of a flesh-and-blood human being", Volker Dehs

"The most documented, detailed, and accurate biography", Count Piero Gondolo della Riva

"A superb [research] tool", Jean-Michel Margot

"A *tour de force* of scholarly investigation", David Coward

"Quite spectacular", Michael Crichton

By the same author

Introduction and critical apparatus, *Souvenirs personnels: Jules Verne*, by Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve, Éditions Paganel, Spring 2021

Introduction and critical apparatus, *Cinq semaines en ballon (Five Weeks in a Balloon)*, Gallimard (2020)

Translation and annotated edition, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, updated and revised, Oxford University Press (2019)

Jules Verne inédit: Les manuscrits déchiffrés (Unexpurgated Jules Verne: The Lost Chapters), ENS éditions and Institut d'histoire du livre, 2015

Introduction and critical apparatus, *Voyage au centre de la terre (Journey to the Centre of the Earth)*, Gallimard, 2014

Translation, introduction, and notes, *Joyous Miseries of Three Travellers in Scandinavia*, Acadian, 2011

Introduction and co-translation, *一个中国人在中国的遭遇 (Tribulations of a Chinese in China)*, Acadian (Peking), 2010

Jules Verne

The Biography

William Butcher

Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke

Contents

Contents	5
Chapter 6. Plays and Poverty: 1851–4	6

Chapter 6. Plays and Poverty: 1851–4

Like many writers, Verne attached great importance to his surroundings. Possibly in late 1850 he lived on the Right Bank, in Rue Louis le Grand, along from Talexy's salon, perhaps on a ground floor. He lived with fellow gunman Paul Perret,¹ also theoretically studying law while actually pursuing literature. Perret had an untamed imagination, often erotic in bent. At one stage the flatmates were in danger of being dragged off to the police station on charges of breaking the windows in their courtyard.² It is not known whether their advanced legal knowledge helped them on this occasion.

On Jules's request, Pierre reluctantly agreed to fund first his board and lodging, then a real flat (Mar. 51). Verne moved into a furnished room in a hotel, but complained about the noise all around, preventing him from sleeping (3 Apr. 51).

Friend Aristide Hignard lived on the top floor of 18 Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle, at the intersection with Rue Mazagran, 50 yards from Arago's place. The boulevard area, housing most of Paris's theatres, had been created by Georges-Eugène Haussmann, as he cut broad swathes through the medieval quarters of the Right Bank. The seventh floor planed majestically "at the brain" of the block, 120 stairs up from a tobacconist's.³ On 9 April Verne moved into accommodation across the corridor from Hignard's. He delightedly reigned over "a light and airy room in which I can put my ideas in order" (ADF 46), facing due south. By student standards, it was a palace, with windows on four sides, two main rooms plus an entrance cubby-hole, en-suite bathroom and kitchen, stove, washbasin, and chest of drawers in one room, a marble chimney in the other, as well as a sofa for entertaining visitors. Verne proudly positioned his large work desk and modest bookshelves in the dining room.

6. Plays and Poverty: 1851–4 (pp. 000–00)

¹ 19 Sep. 96 to Perret in *BSJV* 150:6.

² 19 Sep. 96 to Perret in *BSJV* 150:6.

³ Mar. 51. Later, Verne mysteriously says "Incidentally, in April I'm going to live at 11 Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle" (4 Mar. 53).

Aunt Garcet helped buy linen and a mattress and sewed his curtains.¹ He appreciated his mother's food parcels, with fruit from Chantenay, but even more the money she secretly sent him.² Contemplating Paris as from the top of the Pyramids [Apr. 53], Verne felt like a Napoleonic conqueror. He found room for a F 25 pre-Revolutionary piano.³ On either side of the chimney hung Mathilde and Anna, as he put it, facing a wrecked fishing smack in Uncle Châteaubourg's best storm-tossed style.⁴

It was not all sitting in front of a blank sheet of paper. Verne and a whole circle of friends would crowd into Hignard's rooms, musicians Massé and Talexy to work (Lemire 14), Maisonneuve and Félix Duquesnel (1832–1915) to play. Musical performances turned into baccarat sessions, the stakes escalating astronomically from 50 centimes. The young crowd would leave late, "after the curfew had sounded, slamming the door, lighting a few wax friction matches, gaily singing poetry as they descended".⁵

Henceforth, Verne would use "we" to describe his activities, not needing to mention Hignard. Crossing the corridor one evening to write together, Jules forgot to lock his own door. When he returned, his gold watch had disappeared. The two young men went to the police, who licked their pencils and enquired whether it was an "escapement watch". "Not half!" Verne is said to have exclaimed, departing with roars of laughter.⁶

When Prince-President Bonaparte seized absolute power as self-proclaimed Emperor Napoleon III, Verne excitedly wrote of the fighting: "the shops have all shut. Barricades are going up everywhere: people are being arrested and dragged along by their hair"; "there were fierce battles at the bottom of the street, houses destroyed by cannons!"⁷

¹ 3 Apr. 51; [6 Apr. 51].

² JJV 22; ADF 53.

³ 21 Sep. 53 in *Dix lettres inédites*.

⁴ 21 Jun. 55; 14 Dec. 54.

⁵ Bastard 339–40.

⁶ Bastard 339.

⁷ 4 Dec. 51; [6 Dec. 51].

The discussions about Jules's future dragged on for more than half a decade. He took several unambitious jobs, starting with no. 5 supernumerary clerk in Maître Gamard's law office at F 50 per month, but soon abandoned it in disgust at the exploitation. He tried working in finance, but soon switched to private law tuition. Pierre was not amused, especially when he realised Jules had sold some of the things bought for Ancienne Comédie; the lessons soon stopped (Mar. 51). Jules approached M. Vernes [*sic*], the Protestant banker, on the pretext of a search for shared ancestors, although a job may have been uppermost in his mind (17 Jan. 52).

In the end Pierre sent an ultimatum: Jules must either come back to Nantes for two years' legal apprenticeship or work as a lawyer in Paris. His son responded: "a job in a law practice means 7.30 in the morning till nine at night ... literature above all, as that's all I can do well ... If I did both ... one ... would win out, and ... the bar'd have a low life expectancy" (Mar. 51).

He accepted, however, to work seven or eight hours a day for lawyer Paul Championnière (1798–1851) (Mar. 51). Championnière had trained and practised with Pierre back in 1825, and was distantly related to the Allottes by marriage. However, perhaps before Jules could check in, he caught cholera and died, shocking the would-be lawyer: "He was the first person I knew in the prime of life who's left us!" (7 Apr. 51). After this bolt from the heavens, Jules Verne, Esq., abandoned the idea of any sort of work as "a litigious, quibbling hurler" (6 May 53). While continuing to sign "lawyer", notably at his own and his sisters' marriages, he was now committed to making it as a writer—or bust.¹

Pierre made one last attempt, offering Jules his entire legal practice, worth about F 120,000 (7 Sep. 56). "Anyone else would be crazy not to jump at your offer ... I know what I am, I understand what I may one day become ... [The] practice ... would just wither away" (17 Jan. [52]). A year later, Pierre finally gave in, sold his hard-won practice, and retired.

¹ Nevertheless, Verne wrote "I'm actively looking for a place, I'm going to see Ferdinand Favre" [mid-Oct. 51]. Favre was a pro-Louis-Philippe politician, mayor of Nantes (1832–48 and 1852–7), and sugar-refining and shipping businessman. Verne was presumably seeking a business or law job.

From about 1852 Verne began to visit “the library” “very often” (31 May 52). His reading at this time included Samuel Richardson, especially *Clarissa* (1748); Balzac, in bed every night; and possibly two textbooks by cousin Garcet, *New Lessons in Cosmography* (1853) and *Elements of Mechanics* (1856).¹ The intellectual stimulation may have been one factor behind his slow evolution from drama to historico-geographical prose.

With Monte Cristo closed down, Dumas *filis* invited Verne several times to his home, north of the Tuileries, to eat his celebrated flambé omelettes, and perhaps to work.² Dumas was about to announce ambitious plans for a series of novels following the Wandering Jew down through the centuries, although completing only the 700-page *Isaac Laquédem* (1852–3). Verne is meant to have talked of his own research and plans for a similarly multi-volume epic (RD 43). This “novel of science” would supposedly be a vast fresco, “a viaduct with a hundred arches thrown from yesterday’s Romanticism to tomorrow’s symbolism, a simultaneously realistic and lyric work of art” (ADF 44). In this version of events, Dumas keenly supported the idea, resulting in some of Verne’s early short stories. However, these three-quarters-of-a-century-old recollections of Verne as planning a “novel of science” and as a remarkably precocious precursor of symbolism are distorted by his false reputation for anticipation—although Dumas certainly proposed some major form of collaboration, which Verne accepted [29 Apr. 53].

Verne soon published a third historical story in the *Musée*, “Martin Paz” (1852). Staying with Arago for a few months was a talented Peruvian artist called Ignace Merino, founder of the Lima Academy of Fine Arts. He had brought a documentary album over with him: Verne’s locale, inspiration, and even characters came from Merino’s water-colours, with the illustrations to his text also based on them. When “Martin Paz” came out, it was by “Jules Vernes”: perhaps just an unfortunate slip, but an identical error occurred the following year, before being “corrected” to “Charles Verne” the year

¹ Aug. 52; 8 Dec. 52; ADF 64.

² In Rue Amsterdam. Martin, *Jules Verne*, 27; Allott 17.

after (according to Lottman 38). To lose one wife might be careless, but to mislay an author three times ...

According to the perhaps self-penned presentation preceding it, the story resembled Cooper's *The Spy* (1821) and *The Pioneers* (1823); it had "history, races, customs, landscapes, styles of dress ... poignant scenes, wild tableaux, and outlandish characters". With its geographical insight and impossible love between a Spanish woman and an Indian, "Martin Paz" remains readable today. Despite its disturbing anti-Semitism ("The Jew Everywhere a Jew", who "descended from the Judas that delivered his master for 30 pieces of silver"), it revealed two of Verne's strengths: his tight narrative and his dramatic scenes drawn from an inner eye. "Most people like it and just couldn't wait for the ending", he modestly wrote; critical reaction was indeed good.¹

Pleased by Verne's efforts, Chevalier ordered "a very long article on *Lucia [di Lammermoor]*" (22 Mar. 52), Donizetti's opera (1835), based on Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819). The importance of the command was not only that Verne added a music-criticism cord to his bow, but that the location was Edinburgh and Scotland, for Verne was soon to start a three-book series in the same locale.²

That same year the *Musée* had published Chevalier and Verne's comedy *Castles in California*. Literary collaboration was probably the reason the new author stayed two days with his editor in Marly, twelve miles west of Paris.³ The play, full of mangled proverbs, shows a disillusioned '49er returning from newly-American California to his conventional middle-class home. The publisher continued his autocratic ways: for *Castles*, "what was highly annoying was that the engravings were done in advance: I had to write a text which fitted around them and add totally unnecessary characters" [Jul.? 52].

Perhaps Verne refused his father's F 120,000 offer because a more interesting one was in the works. On about his 24th birthday, he started his first real job, as secretary of the Théâtre Lyrique, under

¹ 22 Aug. 52; RD 45.

² Verne staged Donizetti's operetta *Elisabeth* at the Lyric on 4 January 1854 in a double bill with his own *Blind Man's Buff* (JD 278).

³ [Jul.? 52], cf. [29 Apr. 53].

director Edmond Seveste (17 Jan. 52). The Lyric, on the Boulevard du Temple, was the new name of the Historic Theatre, of *Broken Straws* fame, but which had gone bust twice in the meantime. The position may have again been thanks to Dumas's string-pulling, for Verne met Seveste through him (JD 101). The director, however, died in February, surely making Verne think he jinxed his bosses. His brother Jules Seveste took over.

Verne's aim seems to have been greater visibility, by getting to know the leading authors, composers, and critics; he was indeed to meet Gounod, Faure, Scribe, and Auber.¹ But despite helping run the theatre virtually single-handedly, his humble job-title meant he got little credit. Although he was paid F 100 a month (17 Jan. 52) for the first couple of months – compared to first soprano, diva Marie Cabel's 6,000 – Jules Seveste cut this to nothing, promising in return to stage one Verne play each year; the secretary also made a few carriage trips at F 2 an hour.² Verne later vehemently denied he had ever been paid (2 Dec. 52). So upset were his parents by his new position that he “forgot” to tell them when he returned after the three-month summer break.³

The secretary's work started at midday and filled his evenings (2 Dec. 52). He huddled in a dark, draughty little office on Rue (Vieille) du Temple, not far from his flat and in the medieval Marais, picturesquely dank and crumbling. But he had the run of the magnificent building, with its elliptical auditorium, 2,000 seats in five tiers, enormous stage, and plush red and gold hangings (JJV 21).

Verne spent much of his time on posters, décors, complimentary tickets, contacts with critics, and settling arguments between the temperamental Marie Cabel and her companions and singing partner (ADF 65). According to one contemporary account, he felt cold one day and borrowed a sumptuous fake-ermine cloak from the wardrobe-master. The actors and actresses delightedly watched

¹ If the careers of two later secretaries of the Lyric are any guide, the job carried long-term financial rewards, for both became owner-managers (JJV 22).

² Volker Dehs, “Nous boirons, nous rirons”, *BSJV* 143:14.

³ 8 Dec. 52, cf. 2 Dec. 52.

Jules mincing about in a superb parody of the diva. When she discovered, Cabel was not amused.¹

Verne got on well with his boss, with genuine mutual affection. But the theatre's activities were sometimes savaged by the critics ("childish" — *Revue des deux mondes*, cited by ADF 67): although Seveste bore the brunt, the secretary was also held responsible.

After two years Verne was hoping to do something at the Odéon or Gymnase in the summer (17 May 54). To tell the truth he felt fed up with "that tiresome Lyric" (19 Apr. 54), probably because it was so time-consuming. He tried to resign—but Seveste refused to let him go.

In June 1854, however, Seveste had a stroke and died in turn a few hours later. The hex was working overtime, compelling Verne away from any stable position. "I was very fond of him but ... at last I'm free of the theatre" [1 Jul. 54]. Legally free, perhaps, but moral pressure made him stay on another 14 months (*BSJV* 143:14), and even then, he was not released without a rear-guard skirmish. The interim director—who beat Offenbach to the position— "offered to make me the theatre director ... with a share in the profits ... I refused; I want to be free and show what I have done".² In Jules's hands, the theatre had lost about F 500 a day, roughly the same as his successors would do.³

Verne's double-or-quits renunciation of such an influential position seems rash. He may have regretted it over the next eight years.

Verne's closest friends formed a tight-knit Nantais group: Genevois, Lorois, a Charles Liton, and Pitre Gouté [end of Mar. 55], with whom he had travelled to Dunkirk. When two other good friends died, Verne was shocked. He wrote a long letter in praise of author Jules Lorin, although, or because, he had been living in sin with a married woman; Lorin had dedicated a romantic poem, "Beside the Lake", to

¹ Allott 24–5, reporting the contemporary but untraced "Haucilly"; in *Le Gaulois* of 17 July 1929, Allotte de la Fuyë writes his name as "Ernest du Haucilly".

² Dehs, "Nous boirons", 14; [end 54].

³ Extrapolated from figures provided by Volker Dehs, "'Une 'Bonne Nuit' compromise", *BSJV* 156:7–8.

Paul Verne. The death from consumption of ex-Day Boy David Pilfold also greatly upset him (14 Mar. 53).

From his mid-twenties, Verne felt left on the shelf and lonely in Paris, where at first he had seemed so gloriously free. His provincial dream of taking the capital by storm had not worked out; and as time went by, his poverty became increasingly hard to bear. His social, sexual, and financial problems emerged in a series of letters begging his mother to find him a mate: "Marry me off, any wife you choose. I'll take her with eyes shut and purse open"; "Find me a hunchbacked woman with private means"; "... Jules Verne who, by Jove, longs to marry a rich young woman"; "I don't see why I couldn't dig up a rich young woman in Parisian society who's made a mistake, or might be ready to do so—and Bob's your uncle".¹

He indulged in greater crudeness with Genevois, invariably connecting sex, money, and love: "the bosom is important, I will admit ... but I prefer [my wife] to have only one breast and an extra smallholding in Beauce, a single buttock and huge paddocks in Normandy".² Often attributed to him is a scurrilous poem called "Lamentations of a Fanny Hair". This ditty runs the whole gamut of obscenity, with elements of urine, menstruation, crabs, cunnilingus, and STDs, as well as the passage of schoolboys, Academicians, and decrepit old men—not bedtime reading.

Verne's parents still hoped to marry their eldest son in Nantes. When his mother thought she had found the perfect match—who may be the same as the "pretty little Creole face" Paul was pining for—Verne feigned horror at her origin and temperament, but exulted at her 15,000 a year private income: "a Creole! But that's marrying Vesuvius and Etna! How many Pompeiis and Herculaneums our lavas would cover ... all the same I authorise the young ... woman to officially request my hand".³ He confirmed his wish, "provided my Creole agrees to come and live in Paris".⁴

Another might-have-been was a Louise François, whose parents were friends of the Tronsons. For ages and ages Jules fantasised

¹ 23 Apr. 51; [10? Dec. 53]; 21 Jun. 55; [19 Feb. 56].

² In Soriano 68–9.

³ "Impromptu Verses" 17; 14 Mar. 53.

⁴ [25 Mar. 53], extract in *Jules Verne à Dinard* (Dinard: Mairie, [2000]),

about one girl, undoubtedly her: “Tell me about Mlle ... What’s-her-Name ... She ... has the privilege of being the only thing I’ve thought about for several months” (5 Nov. 53). Soon afterwards Louise got engaged to a fellow property owner.

Then came Laurence Janmar, the fifth in Jules’s serious hopefuls and again driving him mad. A notable’s daughter with private means, probably still boarding at a Nantes convent while her parents were in Paris, Laurence possessed striking beauty, with alluring, velvety-dark eyes, a pale complexion, and a fine, sinuous body; with an English-style deportment, she was reputed fickle and capricious.¹

To avoid upsetting Seveste, Jules asked his father to write about urgent family business calling him back (JJV 25). He duly went home for a week or two at the turn of 1853–4, the main purpose being to pursue Laurence at a fancy-dress masked ball given by Count Eugène Janvier de la Motte, precocious chief justice at the county court. Although the Count later attracted a reputation for consorting with actresses and working-class girls, this occasion was eminently respectable.

Verne went in the tight-fitting eighteenth-century dandy costume once worn by his womanising uncle, Augustin Allotte. Proper dandies wore a ridiculously short jacket, top hat, and whitish mid-calf breeches. Flimsy dancing slippers and skin-tight stockings highlighted the soft, tight covering of every crack and bulge – no codpieces in France. Laurence came as a Spanish gypsy, flaunting her lithe body, impossibly slender waist, irresistible eyes, and rich brown ankles, despite a recent papal ban on such nudity as likely to engender uncontrollable lust. Also present were her close friend, Ninette Chéguillaume, and a Charles Duverger.

In the middle of the ball, the dancing stopped for Jules and two friends to perform a one-act comedy of his composition, making the girls fix their eyes on the young author.² Jules and Laurence were getting on well when he is meant to have overheard her whisper to Ninette that her whalebone corset was killing her ribs. His repartee was the punning “Oh, why can’t I have a ‘costal’ whale of a time?” – perhaps too daring for Nantes. Someone intervened, although

¹ Lottman 55; ADF 61.

² Charles-Noël Martin, “Les Amours de jeunesse de Jules Verne”, *BSJV* 29–30:103–20; ADF 61.

Laurence's eyes allegedly continued to speak volumes to Jules over Duverger's shoulder (ADF 62).

After the ball Pierre reportedly approached Laurence's family with a view to marriage, but without success. All the while, in Jules's words, Laurence had had "two irons in the fire at the same time, [making] a poor young man like Jules Verne die of love" (19 Apr. 54). Inevitably, the bewitcher soon got betrothed. As the engagement continued, Jules was still aching for her, consoling himself that nothing had been consummated yet. The wedding took place in August.

No. 6 came soon after. In April 1854, Verne travelled to Mortagne, a market town southwest of Paris, ostensibly to repair his health. The trip was his mother's idea, to meet "Erménégilde", a relative of Count Fernand de Bouillé (1821 or 1829–70), family friend and extreme reactionary.¹ In Jules's description of the visit, we must strip off the humorous exaggeration to find the semi-sincere core:

It's the perfect moment to marry me off, dearest mother ... serve me up as succulently conjugal ... cry me as your ware ("Try my fine son") and put me in the hands of some nice young lady with plenty of money. If necessary, I'll move to Mortagne ... As for the daughter, she's neither pretty nor ugly, stupid nor intelligent, amusing nor disagreeable, and gives me a son or daughter every nine months regular as clockwork ... Don't think I'm joking: I love country life, I adore domesticity, I worship children ... if you agree to lend a hand, I swear you'll be a grandmother by the end of the year (7 Apr. 54).

No. 7 was another raven-haired beauty, Héloïse David from Chantenay, older but still rather "naive and guileless" (15 Jun. 56). According to the family biographer, she turned up one day at the Lyric with her father in tow, asking for complimentary tickets. Feigning wariness at her short fuse and blatant sensuality, Jules reportedly denied all interest: "I wouldn't be the one to get her going for all the tea in China!" (ADF 59). He duly fell in love with and paid court to Mlle David (14 Dec. 54), who shortly after got betrothed to a white-haired quinquagenarian.

No. 8 was Chantenaysian Ninette Chéguillaume. Following the portentous ball, Paul had become enamoured of this friend of

¹ However, the Count had only two children, Jacques (died in 1870) and Marie (1848–1920), meaning the identity of "Erménégilde" remains mysterious—it may have been his sister, Louise Thérèse (1818–47).

Laurence Janmar and of sister Anna, eight years his junior, and very well off. Pierre received a discreet overture from her cotton-merchant father—who seemed in fact to prefer the older brother! Jules declared himself only too keen to pursue the matter, and sent choice Lyric tickets to “the father of young Ninette (his young Ninette!)”.¹ Verne may even have been interested in another Chéguillaume sister, as he seemed strangely upset at the very existence of Ninette’s brother-in-law (21 Jun. 55).

Ninette’s flightiness was to prove even more damaging than Laurence’s, for a year later Chéguillaume reactivated his plan to marry off his daughter. After all the usual procedures had been gone through, the formal engagement of Paul and Ninette was announced with appropriate pomp and circumstance. The only condition was that Paul resign his naval commission. When he did so and returned in May 1857, his bride-to-be had changed her mind—leaving Paul with no wife and no career (JJV 48).

The next one, with Sophie as perpetual go-between, was a long shot called Pauline² Méry, “as brilliant a match as Ninette“, apparently on the rebound, but worth a go on an all-or-nothing basis: “drive to her family ... and ask for the young lady’s hand on my behalf. They’ll immediately ring for a servant, who’ll show you to the door” [Nov.? 55].

As Jules dispiritedly exclaimed, “all the girls I honour with my munificence marry soon after!” (14 Dec. 54). Every single skirt he glimpsed, such as Éloïde and Pauline Bourgoïn’s at Uncle Prudent’s, left “many regrets and little hope!”³ Just the first league, without mentioning the quickly extinguished flames, read impressively, as the years tolled out the blows to Verne’s hopes: Caroline, 1847; Angèle, 1848; Herminie, 1848; Louise, 1853; Laurence, 1854; “Erménégilde“, 1854; Héloïse, 1854; Ninette, 1855; Pauline, 1855. Nine attempts, nine rebuffs.

Jules clearly felt frustrated at his repeated failures, especially as by 28 no liaison with a girl or woman is on record. He cynically considered that girls at balls dreamed of many simultaneous suitors

¹ [Jun. 55]; 21 Jun. 55.

² Mlle Pauline Méry of Nantes (1835–71) married a ... Chéguillaume, Joseph-Paul-Auguste (1825–97), in Nantes in 1854.

³ “Impromptu Verses” 17.

(17 Apr. 53). In the same vein, marriage, joyless sex, and adultery melded, as he ribaldly wrote to Genevois:

You're now about to get married ... it is a great b ... You will certainly get a stomach ... can you then rest on top for 12 consecutive hours ... or is the wife able to remain on top for a fixed amount of time? ... You'll be beaten by your wife ... In case ... I was forced to play ... the role of consoler I beg you to choose her brunette and well-endowed.

The lover of a married woman saves on a servant and two maids.¹

After all his disappointments, Jules would systematically associate, in his life and his works, nuptials and last rites, virginal white and mourning black, loss of maidenhood and loss of life. As just one example, for the wedding of friend Dr Victor Marcé, now a specialist in spermatic cysts and in mental illness (who would himself commit suicide at 37): "I went to Saint-Germain des Prés for the interment. I must admit I was singularly moved when the funeral procession arrived" (17 Apr. 56).

One contemporary solution was to pay for sex. Verne wrote to Genevois as a connoisseur of the brothels of the boulevard area:

You also seem to believe I don't make any conquests! Ungrateful wretch! Have you forgotten the best houses of the Rue d'Amboise or Rue Montyon where I'm received like the family darling (what am I saying), the spoilt child of the family! Am I not loved for myself, when I have the chance to waste a few score francs there.²

In other words, Verne regularly visited at least two brothels, conveniently close to his residence. The names were immediately familiar to any Parisian. Since at least the eighteenth century, such establishments had represented discretion and "decency ... actresses, dancers, and courtesans of the first order". All-in-one packages of dinner and accommodation were available in Amboise; and a certain Mme Blondy kept a house on Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle for a wide range of purses, lodging "girls and women, French and foreign, presentable and over the hill".³

What was more, the first floor of the seventeenth-century mansion at 8 Rue d'Amboise was a long-established brothel that Toulouse-Lautrec would live in from about 1893, and where he

¹ 5 Nov. 54 in *BSJV* 151:13; Alain Genevois, *Annales*, 15.

² Gilbert Doukan, "Un Auteur à succès malheureux en amour", *BSJV* 48:237–46; cf. Soriano 69.

³ J. Dillon, *Les Bordels de Paris* (Paris, 1790).

painted 16 of his most celebrated works. In that year alone he produced the fur-coated, redheaded “Madame de Gortzikoff”, the elegant poster silhouette of “Le Divan japonais”, and the cancaning “Jane Avril”. It seems unlikely that Jules watched the same Venetian blond putting back her bun as in Toulouse-Lautrec’s mature “Femme de maison refaisant son chignon”. But we can dream that he contemplated the same garish wallpaper and imprinted the same double bed as in “Dans le lit”, or gazed post-coitally through the same double windows as in “Femme à sa fenêtre”.

Despite the release afforded by commercial sex, Verne’s urges may have been blocked so long as to be displaced from their normal locus, his only clear interest in the erogenous zones implying an infantile regression and ambiguous sexuality: “I saw His Highness the Prince Imperial, and his wet nurse, very pretty; I would have loved to have changed places—with the wet nurse I mean” [27 Jun. 56].

In a preliminary stage of perversion, he planned, in unmistakably vulgar terms, to defile Great-Aunt Charruel: “we’ll have to take her by assault ... seize her demilunes ... fire the cannon on the day of capitulation”. While he played a piano, he continued, whose discolouring and discordance approached hers, “I sometimes even imagine I’m touching the excellent aunt, a woman who is hardly touched any more; the comparison particularly disgusts me when I play down there”.¹ The crudeness, in a letter to his mother, betrayed the depths of his sexual disturbance.

Procreation, which most of the belles engaged in within weeks of captivating his enraptured gaze, may also have been tarred with the same brush. Certainly, when he reluctantly agreed to meet Caroline, he made a characteristic dig about her plenteous progeny: “I’ll be as nice as my peculiar character permits ... it seems [she]’s slightly less pregnant than usual” (6 May 53).

Trawling fashionable salons for a mate got him little further (RD 50). But often it is darkest just before dawn. As his unattached friends dwindled—“One more down!”, “only [Paul and me] left”—he announced plans to leave “for Amiens, since my friend [Auguste] Lelarge is marrying Mlle Aimée de Viane. I’ll be gone two days”.²

¹ 21 Sep. 53 in *Dix lettres inédites*.

² [Mar. 56]; [27 Mar. 56]; [18 May 56] in ADF 69.