

Illustrated Interviews.

No. XXXIX.—JULES VERNE AT HOME.

By MARIE A. BELLOC.



HE author of "Round the World in Eighty Days," "Five Weeks in a Balloon," and many other delightful stories which cannot but have endeared his personality to hundreds of thousands of readers in every part of the world, spends his happy, well-filled working life in Amiens, a quiet, French provincial town situated on the direct route from Calais and Boulogne to Paris.

The humblest Amienois can point out Jules Verne's home. No. 1, Rue Charles Dubois, is a charming, old-fashioned house, situated at the corner of a countrified street leading out of a broad boulevard.

The little door let into a lichen-covered wall was answered by a cheerful-looking old *bonne*. As soon as she heard that I had come by appointment, she led the way across a paved courtyard bounded on two sides by a picturesque, irregular building, flanked by the short tower which is so often a feature of French country houses.

As I followed her, I was able to catch a glimpse of Jules Verne's garden, a distant vista of great beeches shading wide expanses of well-kept turf brilliant with flower-beds. Though it was late autumn, everything was exquisitely

neat and dainty, and not a stray leaf was to be seen on the broad gravel paths, where the veteran novelist takes every day one of his frequent constitutionals.

A row of shallow stone steps leads to a conservatory hall, which, filled with palms and flowering shrubs, forms a pleasant antechamber to the beautiful *salon*, where I was joined a few moments later by my host and hostess.

As the famous author is the first to acknowledge, Mme. Jules Verne has played no small part in each and all of her husband's triumphs and successes; and it is difficult to believe that the bright, active old lady, still so full of youthful vivacity and French *espièglerie*, can really have celebrated over a year ago her golden wedding.

Jules Verne, in his personal appearance, does not fulfil the popular idea of a great author. Rather does he give one the impression of being a cultured country gentleman, and this notwithstanding the fact that he always dresses in the sombre black affected by



From a Photo. by]

JULES VERNE'S HOUSE.

[C. Herbert, Amiens.

most Frenchmen belonging to the professional classes. His coat is decorated with the tiny red button denoting that the wearer possesses the high distinction of being an officer of the Legion of Honour. As he sat talking he



From a Photo. by AGE 45. [C. Herbert, Amiens.

did not look his seventy-eight years, and, indeed, appeared but little changed since the large portrait, hanging opposite that of his wife, was painted some twenty odd years ago.

M. Verne is singularly modest about his work, and showed no desire to talk about either his books or himself. Had it not been for the kindly assistance of his wife, whose pride in her husband's genius is delightful to witness, I should have found it difficult to persuade him to give me any particulars about his literary career or his methods of work.

"I cannot remember the time," he observed, in answer to a question, "when I did not write, or intend to be an author; and as you will soon see, many things conspired to that end. You know, I am a Breton by birth—my native town being Nantes—but my father was a Parisian by education and taste, devoted to literature, and, although he was too modest to make any effort to popularize his work, a line poet. Perhaps this is why I myself began my literary career by writing poetry, which—for I followed the example of most budding French litterateurs—took the form of a five-act tragedy," he concluded, with a half-sigh—half-smile.

"My first real piece of work, however," he added, after a pause, "was a little comedy written in collaboration with Dumas fils, who was, and has remained, one of my best friends. Our play was called 'Pailles Rompues' (Split Straws), and was acted at the Gymnase Theatre in Paris; but, although I much enjoyed light dramatic work, I did

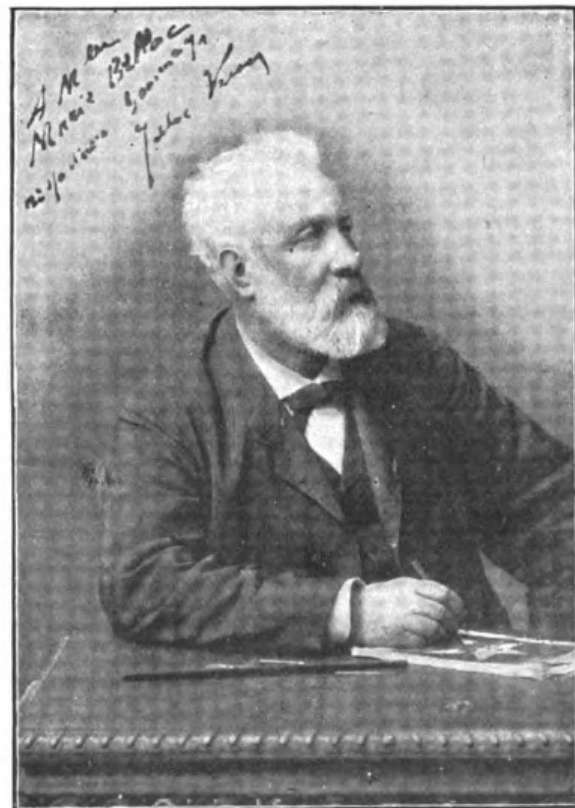
not find that it brought me anything in the way of substance or fortune.

"And yet," he continued, slowly, "I have never lost my love for the stage and everything connected with theatrical life. One of the keenest joys my story-writing has brought me has been the successful staging of some of my novels, notably 'Michel Strogoff.'

"I have often been asked what first gave me the idea of writing what, for the want of a better name, may be styled scientific romances.

"Well, I had always been devoted to the study of geography, much as some people delight in history and historical research. I really think that my love for maps and the great explorers of the world led to my composing the first of my long series of geographical stories.

"When writing my first book, 'Five Weeks in a Balloon,' I chose Africa as the scene of action, for the simple reason that less was, and is, known about that continent than any other; and it struck me that the most ingenious way in which this portion of the world's surface could be explored would be from a balloon. I thoroughly enjoyed writing the story, and, even more, I may add, the researches which it made necessary; for then, as now, I always tried to make even the wildest of my romances as realistic and true to life as possible.



From a Photo. by PRESENT DAY. [C. Herbert, Amiens.

"Once the story was finished, I sent the manuscript to the well-known Paris publisher, M. Hetzel. He read the tale, was interested by it, and made me an offer which I accepted. I may tell you that this excellent man and his son became, and have remained, my very good friends, and the firm are about to publish my seventieth novel."

"Then you passed no anxious moments waiting on fame?" I asked. "Did your first book become immediately popular, both at home and abroad?"

"Yes," he answered, modestly. "'Five Weeks in a Balloon' has remained to this day one of the most read of my stories, but you must remember that I was already a man of thirty-five when this book was published, and had been married for some eight years," he concluded, turning to Mme. Verne with a charming air of old-fashioned gallantry.

"Your love of geography did not prevent your possessing a strong bent for science?"

"Well, I do not in any way pose as a scientist, but I esteem myself fortunate as having been born in an age of remarkable discoveries, and perhaps still more wonderful inventions."

"You are doubtless aware," interposed Mme. Verne, proudly, "that many apparently impossible scientific phenomena in my husband's romances have come true?"

"Tut, tut," cried M. Verne, deprecatingly, "that is a mere coincidence, and is doubtless owing to the fact that even when inventing scientific phenomena I always try and make everything seem as true and simple as possible. As to the accuracy of my descriptions, I owe that in a great measure to the fact that, even before I began writing stories, I always took numerous notes out of every book, newspaper, magazine, or scientific report that I came across. These notes were, and are, all classified according to the subject with which they dealt, and I need hardly point out to you how invaluable much of this material has been to me."

"I subscribe to over twenty newspapers," he continued, "and I am an assiduous reader of every scientific publication; even apart from my work I keenly enjoy reading or hearing about any new discovery or experiment in the worlds of science, astronomy, meteorology, or physiology."

"And do you find that this miscellaneous reading suggests to you any new ideas for stories, or do you depend for your plots wholly on your own imagination?"

"It is impossible to say what suggests the

skeleton of a story; sometimes one thing, sometimes another. I have often carried an idea in my brain for years before I had occasion to work it out on paper, but I always make a note when anything of the kind occurs to me. Of course, I can distinctly trace the beginnings of some of my books: 'Round the World in Eighty Days' was the result of reading a tourist advertisement in a newspaper. The paragraph which caught my attention mentioned the fact that nowadays it would be quite possible for a man to travel round the world in eighty days, and it immediately flashed into my mind that the traveller, profiting by a difference of meridian, could be made to either gain or lose a day during that period of time. It was this initial thought that really made the whole point of the story. You will, perhaps, remember that my hero, Phineas Fogg, owing to this circumstance arrived home in time to win his wager, instead of, as he imagined, a day too late."

"Talking of Phineas Fogg, monsieur: unlike most French writers, you seem to enjoy making your heroes of English or foreign extraction."

"Yes, I consider that members of the English-speaking race make excellent heroes, especially where a story of adventure, or scientific pioneering work, is about to be described. I thoroughly admire the pluck and go-ahead qualities of the nation which have planted the Union Jack on so great a portion of the earth's surface."

"Your stories also differ from those of almost all your fellow-authors," I ventured to observe, "inasmuch that in them the fair sex plays so small a part."

An approving glance from my kindly hostess showed me that she agreed with the truth of my observation.

"I deny that *in toto*," cried M. Verne, with some heat. "Look at 'Mistress Branican,' and the charming young girls in some of my stories. Whenever there is any necessity for the feminine element to be introduced you will always find it there." Then, smiling: "Love is an all-absorbing passion, and leaves room for little else in the human breast; my heroes need all their wits about them, and the presence of a charming young lady might now and again sadly interfere with what they have to do. Again, I have always wished to so write my stories that they might be placed without the least hesitation in the hands of all young people, and I have scrupulously avoided any scene which, say, a boy would not like to think his sister would read."

"Before daylight wanes, would you not like to come upstairs and see my husband's workroom and study?" asked my hostess; "there we can continue our conversation."

And so, with Mme. Verne leading the way, we went once more through the light, airy hall, where a door opened straight on to the quaint winding staircase, which leads up and up till are reached the cosy set of rooms where M. Verne passes the greater

colour of my host's yacht, the *St. Michel*, a splendid little boat in which he and his wife spent, some years ago, many of the happiest hours of their long dual life.

Opening out of the bedroom is a fine large apartment, Jules Verne's library. The room is lined with book-cases, and in the middle a large table groans under a carefully sorted mass of newspapers, reviews, and scientific reports, to say nothing of a representative collection of French and English periodical literature. A number of cardboard pigeon-holes, occupying however wonderfully little space, contain the twentyodd thousand notes garnered by the author during his long life.

"Tell me what are a man's books, and I will tell you what manner of man he is," makes an excellent paraphrase of a good old saying, and might well be applied to Jules Verne. His library is strictly for use, not



From a Photo. by

THE WORKROOM.

[O. Herbert, Amiens.]

part of his life, and from where have issued many of his most enchanting books. As we went along the passage, I noticed some large maps—dumb testimonies of their owner's delight in geography and love of accurate information—hanging on the wall.

"It is here," remarked Mme. Verne, throwing open the door of what proved to be a tiny, cell-like bed-chamber, "that my husband does his actual writing each morning. You must know that he gets up at five, and by lunch-time, that is, eleven o'clock, his actual writing, proof-correcting, and so on, are over for the day; but one cannot burn the candle at both ends, and each evening he is generally sound asleep by eight or half-past eight o'clock."

The plain wooden desk-table is situated in front of the one large window, and opposite the little camp bed; between the pauses of his work on winter mornings M. Verne, by glancing up, is able to see the dawn breaking over the beautiful spire of Amiens Cathedral. The tiny room is bare of all ornamentation, save for two busts of Molière and Shakespeare, and a few pictures, including a water-

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show, and well-worn copies of such intellectual friends as Homer, Virgil, Montaigne, and Shakespeare, shabby, but how dear to their owner; editions of Fenimore Cooper, Dickens, and Scott show hard and constant usage; and there also, in newer dress, many of the better-known English novels have found their way.

"These books will show you," observed M. Verne, genially, "how sincere is my affection for Great Britain. All my life I have delighted in the works of Sir Walter Scott, and during a never-to-be-forgotten tour in the British Isles, my happiest days were spent in Scotland. I still see, as in a vision, beautiful, picturesque Edinburgh, with its Heart of Midlothian, and many entrancing memories; the Highlands, world-forgotten Iona, and the wild Hebrides. Of course, to one familiar with the works of Scott, there is scarce a district of his native land lacking some association connected with the writer and his immortal work."

"And how did London impress you?"

"Well, I consider myself a regular devotee of the Thames. I think the great river is



From a Photo. by]

THE LIBRARY.

[C. Herbert, Amiens.

the most striking feature of that extraordinary city."

"I should like to ask you your opinion of some of our boys' books and stories of adventure. Of course, you know England has led the van in regard to such literature."

"Yes, indeed, notably with that classic, beloved alike by old and young, 'Robinson Crusoe'; and yet perhaps I shall shock you by admitting that I myself prefer the dear old 'Swiss Family Robinson.' People forget that Crusoe and his man Friday were but an episode in a seven-volumed story. To my mind the book's great merit is that it was apparently the first romance of the kind ever perpetrated. We have all written 'Robinsons,'" he added, laughing; "but it is a moot question if any of them would have seen the light had it not been for their famous prototype."

"And where do you place other English writers of adventure?"

"Unhappily, I can read only those works which have been translated into French. I never tire of Fenimore Cooper; certain of his romances deserve true immortality, and will I trust be remembered long after the so-called literary giants of a later age are forgotten. Then, again, I thoroughly enjoy Captain Marryat's breezy romances. Owing to my unfortunate inability to read English, I am not so familiar as I should like to be with Mayne Read and Robert Louis Stevenson; still, I was greatly delighted with the latter's 'Treasure Island,' of which I possess

a translation. It seemed to me, when I read it, to possess extraordinary freshness of style and enormous power. I have not mentioned," he continued, "the English writer whom I consider the master of them all, namely, Charles Dickens," and the face of the King of Story-tellers lit up with youthful enthusiasm. "I consider that the author of 'Nicholas Nickleby,' 'David Copperfield,' and 'The Cricket on

the Hearth' possesses pathos, humour, incident, plot, and descriptive power, any one of which might have made the reputation of a less gifted mortal; but here, again, is one of those whose fame may smoulder but will never die."

Whilst her husband was concluding these remarks, Mme. Verne drew my attention to a large book-case filled with rows of apparently freshly bound and little-read books. "Here," she observed, "are various French, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, and Russian editions of M. Verne's books, including a Japanese and Arab translation of 'Round the World in Eighty Days,' and my kindly hostess took down and opened the strange vellum-bound pages wherein each little Arab who runs may read of the adventures of Phineas Fogg, Esq."

"My husband," she added, "has never re-read a chapter of a single one of his stories. When the last proofs are corrected his interest in them ceases, and this, although he has sometimes been thinking over a plot, and inventing situations figuring in a story, during years of his life."

"And what, monsieur, are your methods of work?" I inquired. "I suppose you can have no objection to giving away your recipe?"

"I cannot see," he answered, good-humouredly, "what interest the public can find in such things; but I will initiate you into the secrets of my literary kitchen, though

En l'année 1872, la maison portant le numéro
 7 de Saville-row, Burlington Gardens — maison dans
 laquelle Sheridan mourut en 1814, — était habitée
 par Philéas Fogg, esq., l'un des membres les plus
 singuliers et les plus remarquables du Reform-Club
 de Londres, bien qu'il semblât pendant sa tâche
 de ne rien faire qui fût digne d'attirer l'attention.

À l'un des plus grands orateurs qui honorent
 l'Angleterre, succédait donc le Philéas Fogg,
 personnage énigmatique, dont on ne savait
 rien, sinon que c'était un fort galant homme
 et l'un des plus beaux gentlemen de la
 haute société anglaise.

On disait qu'il ressemblait à lord Byron —
 par la tête, car il était insupportable quant aux
 pieds, — mais un Byron à moustaches et favoris
 un Byron impassible, qui aurait vécu mille
 ans sans vieillir.

FACSIMILE OF JULES VERNE'S HANDWRITING.

I do not know that I would recommend anybody else to proceed on the same plan; for I always think that each of us works in his or her own way, and instinctively knows what method is best. Well, I start by making a draft of what is going to be my new story. I never begin a book without knowing what the beginning, the middle, and the end will be. Hitherto I have always been fortunate enough to have not one, but half-a-dozen definite schemes floating in my mind. If I ever find myself hard up for a subject, I shall consider that it is time for me to give up work. After having completed my preliminary draft, I draw up a plan of the chapters, and then begin the actual writing of the first rough copy in pencil, leaving a half-page margin for corrections and emendations; I then read the whole, and go over all I have already done in ink. I consider that my real labour begins with my first set of proofs, for I not

only correct something in every sentence, but I rewrite whole chapters. I do not seem to have a grip of my subject till I see my work in print; fortunately, my kind publisher allows me every latitude as regards corrections, and I often have as many as eight or nine revises. I envy, but do not attempt to emulate, the example of those who from the time they write Chapter I. to the word Finis, never see reason to alter or add a single word."

"This method of composition must greatly retard your work?"

"I do not find it so. Thanks to my habits of regularity, I invariably produce two completed novels a year. I am also always in advance of my work; in fact, I

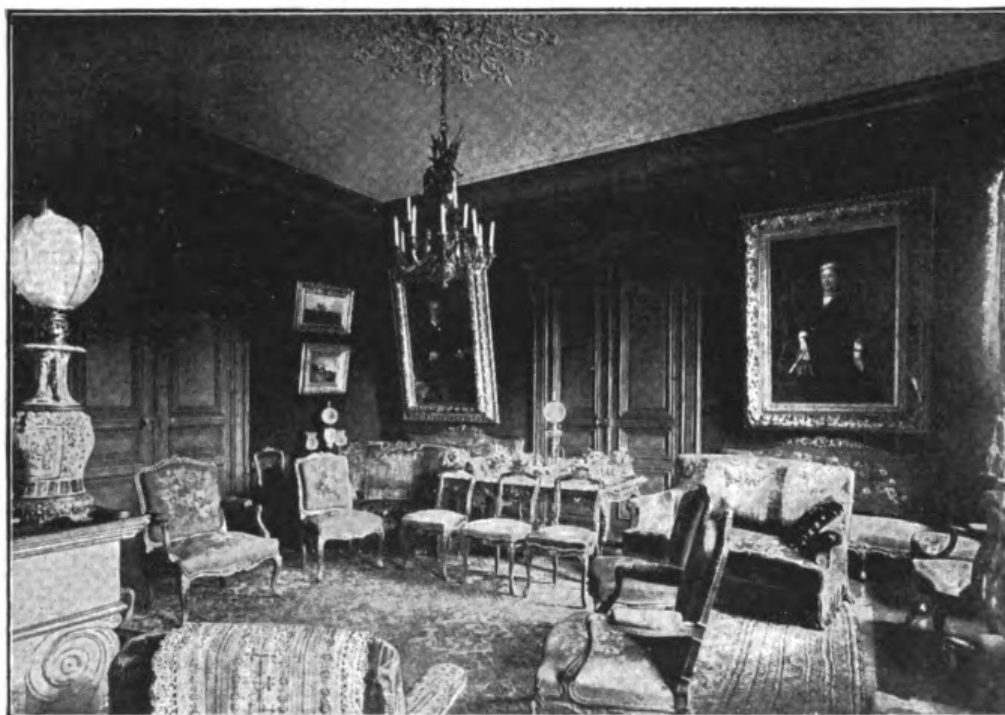
am now writing a story which properly belongs to my working year 1897; in other words, I have five manuscripts ready for the printers. Of course," he added, thoughtfully, "this has not been achieved without sacrifice. I soon found real hard work and a constant, steady rate of production incompatible with the pleasures of society. When we were younger, my wife and myself lived in Paris, and enjoyed the world and its manifold interests to the full. During the last twelve years I have become a townsman of Amiens; my wife is an Amiennoise by birth. It was here that I first made her acquaintance, fifty-three years ago, and little by little all my affections and interests have centered in the town. Some of my friends will even tell you that I am far prouder of being a town councillor of Amiens than of my literary reputation. I do not deny that I thoroughly enjoy taking my share in municipal government."

"Then, have you never followed the example of so many of your own personages, and travelled, as you easily might have done, here, there, and everywhere?"

"Yes, indeed; I am passionately fond of travelling, and at one time spent a considerable portion of each year on my yacht, the *St. Michel*. Indeed, I may say I am devoted to the sea, and I can imagine nothing more ideal than a sailor's life; but with age came a strong love of peace and quietude, and," added the veteran novelist, half sadly, "I now journey only in imagination."

'Doctor Ox' formed the basis of an operetta at the Variétés some seventeen years ago. I was once able to superintend the mounting of my pieces myself; now, my only glimpse of the theatrical world is seen from the front, in our charming Amiens theatre, on the, I must admit, frequent occasions when some good provincial company honours our town with its presence."

"I suppose," I observed to Mme. Verne, "that your husband receives many communications from his immense English constituency of unknown friends and readers?"



From a Photo. by]

THE DRAWING-ROOM.

[C. Herbert, Amiens.

"I believe, monsieur, that you add the dramatist's laurels to your other triumphs?"

"Yes," he answered; "you know we have in France a proverb which declares that a man always ends by returning to his old love. Well, as I told you before, I always took a special delight in everything dramatic, and made my literary début as a playwright, and of the many substantial satisfactions brought me by my labours, none gave more pleasure than my return to the stage."

"And which of your stories were most successful in dramatic form?"

"*'Michel Strogoff'* was perhaps the most popular; it was played all over the world; then *'Round the World in Eighty Days'* was very successful, and more lately *'Mathias Sandorf'* was acted in Paris; it may amuse you to know further that my

"Yes, indeed," she cried, brightly; "and the applications for autographs! I wish you could see them. If I were not there to save him from his friends, he would spend most of his time writing out his name on slips of paper. I suppose few people have received stranger epistles than my husband. People write to him about all sorts of things: they suggest plots for new stories, they confide to him their troubles, they tell him their adventures, and they send him their books."

"And do those unknown correspondents ever permit themselves to ask indiscreet questions about M. Verne's future plans?"

My good-natured and courteous host answered for her, "Many are so kind as to be interested in my next book; if you share that curiosity, you may care to know what I have not yet announced to any but my intimates,

namely, that my next story will have for title, 'L'Ile Hélice'—in English, 'Screw Island.' It embodies a set of notions and ideas that have been in my mind for many years. The action will take place on a floating island created by the ingenuity of man, a kind of *Great Eastern* magnified 10,000 times, and containing, of course, the whole of what in this case may be truly called a moving population. It is my intention," concluded M. Verne, "to complete, before my working days are done, a series which shall conclude in story

know, I have dealt with the moon, but a great deal remains to be done, and if health and strength permit me, I hope to finish the task."

There was still half an hour left before the Calais-Paris train (once so eloquently described by Rossetti) was due, and Mme. Verne, with the gracious politeness which is so peculiarly the attribute of well-bred Frenchwomen, drove me to the beautiful cathedral, Notre Dame d'Amiens, a poem in stone, dating from the twelfth century. Within its stately walls the chance English tourist



From a Photo. by]

JULES VERNE IN THE GARDEN.

[C. Herbert, Amiens.

form my whole survey of the world's surface and the heavens; there are still left corners of the world to which my thoughts have not yet penetrated. As you

may, all unknowingly, see, any Sunday, the fine old man to whose pen he cannot but have owed many happy hours as boy or man.