

20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

CHAPTER 2

The Pros and Cons

DURING THE PERIOD in which these developments were occurring, I had returned from a scientific undertaking organized to explore the Nebraska **badlands** in the United States. In my capacity as Assistant Professor at the Paris Museum of Natural History, I had been attached to this expedition by the French government. After spending six months in Nebraska, I arrived in New York laden with valuable collections near the end of March. My departure for France was set for early May. In the meantime, then, I was busy **classifying** my **mineralogical**, botanical, and **zoological** treasures when that incident took place with the Scotia

I was perfectly **abreast** of this question, which was the big news of the day, and how could I not have been? I had read and **reread** every American and European newspaper without being any farther along. This mystery **puzzled** me. Finding it impossible to form any views, I **drifted** from one extreme to the other. Something was out there, that much was certain, and any **doubting** Thomas was invited to place his finger on the Scotia's wound.

When I arrived in New York, the question was at the boiling point. The hypothesis of a **drifting islet** or an **elusive** reef, put forward by people not quite in their right minds, was completely eliminated. And indeed, unless this reef had an engine in its belly, how could it move about with such prodigious speed?

Also **discredited** was the idea of a floating hull or some other enormous **wreckage**, and again because of this speed of movement.

So only two possible solutions to the question were left, creating two very distinct groups of supporters: on one side, those favoring a monster of colossal strength; on the other, those **favoring** an "underwater boat" of tremendous motor power.

Now then, although the latter hypothesis was completely admissible, it couldn't stand up to inquiries conducted in both the New World and the Old. That a private individual had such a mechanism at his disposal was less than probable. Where and when had he built it, and how could he have built it in secret?

Only some government could own such an engine of destruction, and in these **disaster-filled** times, when men tax their **ingenuity** to build increasingly powerful aggressive weapons, it was possible that, unknown to the rest of the world, some nation could have been testing such a fearsome machine. The **Chassepot** rifle led to the torpedo, and the **torpedo** has led to this underwater **battering** ram, which in turn will lead to the world putting its foot down. At least I hope it will.

But this hypothesis of a war machine collapsed in the face of formal **denials** from the various governments. Since the public interest was at stake and transoceanic travel was suffering, the **sincerity** of these governments could not be **doubted**. Besides, how could the assembly of this underwater boat have escaped public notice? Keeping a secret under such circumstances would be difficult enough for an individual, and certainly impossible for a nation whose every move is under constant surveillance by rival powers.

So, after inquiries conducted in England, France, Russia, **Prussia**, Spain, Italy, America, and even Turkey, the hypothesis of an underwater Monitor was ultimately rejected.

And so the monster **surfaced** again, despite the endless **witticisms heaped** on it by the popular press, and the human imagination soon got caught up in the most ridiculous ichthyological fantasies.

20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

After I arrived in New York, several people did me the honor of consulting me on the phenomenon in question. In France I had published a **two-volume** work, in **quarto**, entitled The Mysteries of the Great Ocean Depths. Well received in scholarly circles, this book had established me as a specialist in this pretty obscure field of natural history. My views were in demand. As long as I could deny the reality of the business, I confined myself to a flat "no comment." But soon, **pinned** to the wall, I had to explain myself straight out. And in this vein, "the honorable Pierre Aronnax, Professor at the Paris Museum," was **summoned** by The New York Herald to formulate his views no matter what.

I complied. Since I could no longer hold my tongue, I let it **wag**. I discussed the question in its every aspect, both political and scientific, and this is an excerpt from the **well-padded** article I published in the issue of April 30.

"Therefore," I wrote, "after examining these different hypotheses one by one, we are forced, every other **supposition** having been **refuted**, to accept the existence of an extremely powerful marine animal.

"The deepest parts of the ocean are totally unknown to us. No soundings have been able to reach them. What goes on in those distant depths? What creatures inhabit, or could inhabit, those regions twelve or fifteen miles beneath the surface of the water? What is the constitution of these animals? It's almost beyond **conjecture**.

"However, the solution to this problem submitted to me can take the form of a choice between two alternatives.

"Either we know every variety of creature **populating** our planet, or we do not.

"If we do not know every one of them, if nature still keeps **ichthyological** secrets from us, nothing is more **admissible** than to accept the existence of fish or **cetaceans** of new species or even new **genera**, animals with a basically 'cast-iron' constitution that **inhabit strata** beyond the reach of our **soundings**, and which some development or other, an urge or a **whim** if you prefer, can bring to the upper level of the ocean for long intervals.

"If, on the other hand, we do know every living species, we must look for the animal in question among those marine creatures already **cataloged**, and in this event I would be inclined to accept the existence of a giant narwhale.

"The common narwhale, or sea unicorn, often reaches a length of sixty feet. Increase its dimensions **fivefold** or even **tenfold**, then give this **cetacean** a strength in proportion to its size while **enlarging** its offensive weapons, and you have the animal we're looking for. It would have the proportions determined by the officers of the Shannon, the instrument needed to **perforate** the Scotia, and the power to pierce a steamer's hull.

"In essence, the narwhale is armed with a sort of ivory sword, or lance, as certain **naturalists** have expressed it. It's a **king-sized** tooth as hard as steel. Some of these teeth have been found buried in the bodies of **baleen** whales, which the narwhale attacks with **invariable** success. Others have been **wrenched**, not without difficulty, from the **undersides** of vessels that **narwhales** have pierced clean through, as a **gimlet pierces** a wine barrel. The museum at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris owns one of these **tusks** with a length of **2.25** meters and a width at its base of **forty-eight centimeters**!

"All right then! Imagine this weapon to be ten times stronger and the animal ten times more powerful, launch it at a speed of twenty miles per hour, multiply its mass times its velocity, and you get just the collision we need to cause the specified **catastrophe**.

"So, until information becomes more abundant, I plump for a sea unicorn of colossal dimensions, no longer

20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

armed with a mere lance but with an actual spur, like **ironclad frigates** or those **warships** called '**rams**,' whose mass and motor power it would possess simultaneously.

“This **inexplicable** phenomenon is thus explained away--unless it's something else entirely, which, despite everything that has been sighted, studied, explored and experienced, is still possible!”

These last words were **cowardly** of me; but as far as I could, I wanted to protect my **professorial** dignity and not lay myself open to laughter from the Americans, who when they do laugh, laugh **raucously**. I had left myself a **loophole**. Yet deep down, I had accepted the existence of “the monster.”

My article was **hotly debated**, causing a fine old **uproar**. It **rallied** a number of supporters. Moreover, the solution it proposed allowed for free play of the imagination. The human mind enjoys impressive visions of **unearthly** creatures. Now then, the sea is precisely their best medium, the only setting suitable for the breeding and growing of such giants--next to which such land animals as elephants or **rhinoceroses** are mere **dwarves**. The liquid masses support the largest known species of mammals and perhaps **conceal mollusks** of **incomparable** size or **crustaceans** too **frightful** to **contemplate**, such as **100-meter lobsters** or **crabs** weighing **200** metric tons! Why not? Formerly, in **prehistoric** days, land animals (**quadrupeds**, **apes**, reptiles, birds) were built on a gigantic scale. Our Creator cast them using a **colossal** mold that time has gradually made smaller. With its **untold** depths, couldn't the sea keep alive such huge specimens of life from another age, this sea that never changes while the land masses undergo almost continuous alteration? Couldn't the heart of the ocean hide the **last-remaining** varieties of these titanic species, for whom years are centuries and centuries **millennia**?

But I mustn't let these fantasies run away with me! Enough of these fairy tales that time has changed for me into harsh realities. I repeat: opinion had **crystallized** as to the nature of this phenomenon, and the public accepted without argument the existence of a **prodigious** creature that had nothing in common with the **fabled** sea serpent.

Yet if some saw it purely as a scientific problem to be solved, more practical people, especially in America and England, were determined to **purge** the ocean of this **daunting** monster, to insure the safety of **transoceanic** travel. The industrial and commercial newspapers dealt with the question **chiefly** from this viewpoint. The Shipping & **Mercantile** Gazette, the Lloyd's List, France's **Packetboat** and Maritime & Colonial Review, all the **rags** devoted to insurance companies--who threatened to raise their premium rates-- were unanimous on this point.

Public opinion being pronounced, the States of the Union were the first in the field. In New York preparations were under way for an expedition designed to chase this **narwhale**. A **high-speed** frigate, the Abraham Lincoln, was fitted out for putting to sea as soon as possible. The naval **arsenals** were unlocked for Commander Farragut, who pressed **energetically** forward with the **arming** of his frigate.

But, as it always happens, just when a decision had been made to chase the monster, the monster put in no further appearances. For two months nobody heard a word about it. Not a single ship encountered it. Apparently the **unicorn** had gotten wise to these plots being woven around it. People were constantly **babbling** about the creature, even via the Atlantic Cable! Accordingly, the **wags** claimed that this slippery **rascal** had **waylaid** some passing **telegram** and was making the most of it.

So the **frigate** was equipped for a **far-off** voyage and armed with **fearsome** fishing gear, but nobody knew where to steer it. And **impatience** grew until, on June 2, word came that the **Tampico**, a **steamer** on the San Francisco line sailing from California to Shanghai, had **sighted** the animal again, three weeks before in the **northerly** seas of the Pacific.

20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

This news caused intense excitement. Not even a **24-hour breather** was granted to Commander Farragut. His provisions were loaded on board. His coal **bunkers** were **overflowing**. Not a **crewman** was missing from his post. To cast off, he needed only to fire and stoke his **furnaces**! Half a day's delay would have been **unforgivable**! But Commander Farragut wanted nothing more than to go forth.

I received a letter three hours before the Abraham Lincoln left its Brooklyn pier;* the letter read as follows:

***Author's** Note: A pier is a type of wharf expressly set aside for an individual vessel.

Pierre **Aronnax**

Professor at the Paris Museum

Fifth Avenue Hotel

New York

Sir:

If you would like to join the expedition on the Abraham Lincoln, the government of the Union will be pleased to regard you as France's representative in this undertaking. Commander **Farragut** has a cabin at your disposal.

Very **cordially** yours,

J. B. **HOBSON**,

Secretary of the Navy.

20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

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20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

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20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

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20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

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20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

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20,000 Leagues Under The Seas: Chapter 1

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