The Begum's Fortune Short Guide

The Begum's Fortune by Jules Verne

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Contents

Characters

In this novel, Verne created characters not for their own sake but for the sake of his story. None of them is well rounded, and even the major figures are primarily representatives of human virtues and vices. The main character is a young Alsatian called Marcel Bruckman. It is interesting that Verne the Frenchman, with no obvious love for the Germans, should choose for his protagonist a young man whose roots are in an area that has strong cultural roots in both nations, enabling him to make choices not rooted in nationalism.

Marcel Bruckman, the young Alsatian, combines all the good qualities of his dual parentage. He is intelligent and rational, a good engineer as well as a courageous fighter. He is a little too good to be true, but Verne is using him to make a point.

And the brilliant young technician, who manages to gain the confidence of the German professor by pretending to be German, is really a patriotic Frenchman and protege of Dr. Sarrasin, the founder of France Ville.

While Marcel carries out all the action, getting from one precarious situation to the next, the other characters in the novel have little life of their own. They are completely flat. Dr. Sarrasin is the noble philanthropist, a scientist whose chief goal is the benefit of mankind. He is completely unselfish, and happy in his model city, but he is also capable of rising to the occasion in an emergency, and organizes what is probably the first civil defense against a threatened attack of France Ville by Stahlstadt's weaponry.

His antagonist, Professor Schultz, is the direct opposite of the good doctor.

Completely convinced of the superiority of the German race, he ruthlessly but brilliantly uses his inheritance to create a city and machinery that is intended to eventually subjugate the world. Verne makes him a caricature of a German. Like the French stereotype of his countrymen, Herr Schultz eats nothing but sauerkraut and sausages: "'I wonder,' resumed Herr Schultz with a sigh, 'how people can endure existence, when they have neither sausages nor sauerkraut, nor beer.' 'Life must be one long misery for them,' replied Marcel. 'It would really be a charity to unite them with the Vaterland.' "Well, well, that will come, that will come!' exclaimed the King of Steel." Aside from his satirical and comical aspects, however, Schultz is Verne's first truly evil scientist.

He looks at nature and humanity with cold, analytical logic, and despises mankind.

Social Concerns

Jules Verne is most famous for his futuristic novels which, in retrospect, contain some amazingly accurate scientific forecasts. In this novel, his chief concern is the use of horrendous military weapons by a totalitarian power bent on destroying innocent human beings. Like most of his novels, this one has a factual basis. The Franco-Prussian war had ended not too long before the writing of the novel with terrible results for France, especially the loss of Alsace -Lorraine. As a French patriot, Verne feared the military expansionism of Germany, and it may not have been a coincidence that one of the illustrations showing the Teutonic Professor Schultze looks very much like a picture of Bismarck without the mustache. What would become of civilization if such a ruthless militaristic power should also abuse science and technology to create military satellites, long range bombardment, gas shells, and incendiary bombs?

The title, The Begum's Fortune, suggests an answer to this question. Initially, it may be a bit misleading since the story is not about a treasure. But an enormous amount of money sets the conflict between military and human interests in motion. Initially, it is Doctor Sarrasin, a serious French scientist and humanitarian, who appears to be the sole heir of a distant relative, husband of an Indian Begum. The sum of twenty-one million francs, an incredible amount of money in Verne's time, is left to Sarrasin to dispose of as he wishes. After the first shock has worn off, the doctor is displeased by the sudden attention of his colleagues and the press, and he decides to donate the money to a scientific institution, to be used to create an ideal city for the benefit of mankind.

Unfortunately, news of the inheritance also comes to the attention of a German university professor, Herr Schultz, who is also distantly related to the Begum and has a legitimate right to the money, too.

For the German Schultz, inheriting the Begum's millions creates simply an opportunity to promote the glory of the Fatherland by carrying out his immoral trade in monster cannons. As a result of his claim, the twenty-one million are split, and each heir receives half the amount. In contrast to Dr. Sarrasin, Herr Schultz is not a philanthropist, but he, too, decides to build a city, Stahlstadt, a munitions factory with the latest scientific technology, which he sells to anyone who can pay his price. Both France Ville, Dr.

Sarrasin's creation, and Professor Schultz's Stahlstadt, are built as close neighbors in the wilderness and isolation of Oregon, the frontier of the United States. Schultz's anger makes the innocent city of his rival an inviting target.

The scene is thus set, and the conflict between peace and war, good and evil can begin.

Verne did not write his novel to condemn science. France Ville is built after the latest scientific concepts, which are employed for the betterment of mankind.

Verne spends considerable time and detail on his plans for an ideal city. Dr.

Sarrasin allows his citizens to pick their own architectural style for their houses, but they have to obey certain building codes. The setback for each house, each a single family dwelling, is prescribed, as well as the size of a garden space, the construction materials to be used, sanitary furnishings, and other practical aspects.

Being a doctor, Sarrasin is deeply concerned about hygiene and healthful living.

All his citizens have to subscribe to the middle-class work ethic; loafers and parasites are not tolerated. France Ville is a Utopia, a scientifically planned community with a decidedly socialistic atmosphere, where all citizens have equal rights and are governing themselves. Since Verne's creation was an ideal, the people of this town are all rational beings, and unselfishly put the welfare of the community above their own personal goals. As the ideal community is shaped by its people, so are the people shaped by the communal spirit. The reason that the individual is not given more prominence is because the true individualist has no place in a Utopian structure.

How, then, does France Ville differ from Stahlstadt? The difference lies primarily in the moral rightness of its existence. The citizens of Dr. Sarrasin's community have choices, but these choices are determined by the needs of the town, and are therefore accepted because they are simply the most humane and the most moral. . . In Stahlstadt, no choices are given. The will and desires of Mr. Schultz, no matter how evil and selfserving, are the only reasons for its being, and the people are merely used to carry them out regardless of their consequences.

Techniques

In 1879, Verne's publisher Hetzel had asked him to look at a manuscript of a priest who was a protege. Initially, Verne did not think much of it. He wrote to Hetzel "The novel, if that is what it is, is a complete dud. There is absolutely no action, no struggle, and consequently no interest in it. The abbe gets all excited about his new torpedo thing, but I'll be hanged if we ever see it work." However, as a favor to Hetzel, Verne agreed to rewrite the novel, and soon became intrigued with its possibilities. By keeping the characters fairly simple and basic, he underscored the elemental differences between the bellicose German and the humanitarian Frenchman. Turning the story into a satirical fantasy, he could exaggerate certain features to make a point. The plot is fantastic, but it becomes plausible once the underlying premise is accepted.

The contrast between the two societies could not be greater. Stahlstadt, perhaps suggested by Krupp's Essen, is a grim place: "Dreary roads, black cinders and coke, wound around the sides of the mountains. Heaps of variegated scoria, which the scanty herbage fails to cover, glance and glare like the eyes of a basilisk.

Here and there yawns the shaft of a deserted mine, a dark gulf, the mouth grown over with briars." The whole scenery becomes a monster, and its inhabitants live a dreary and monotonous existence. Even children like Carl, the landlady's son are employed by the mine.

"Carl's young life was almost entirely passed fifteen hundred feet below the surface of the earth." Verne allows nothing pleasant to relieve the dreariness of Stahl Stadt.

By contrast, France Ville is perfection.

"Half buried in thick masses of oleander and tamarinds, the beautiful city lay at the foot of the Cascade mountains, its marble quays gently caressed by the waves of the Pacific. The carefully watered roads, freshened by the breeze, a cheerful and animated spectacle . . . Brilliant beds of flowers exhaled their sweetness around the calm and smiling white houses." And the inhabitants are equally blessed. "A stranger arriving in the town would have been at once struck with the healthful look of the inhabitants."

Things are either black or white in this novel, creating a moral allegory, which is even more prominently expressed in the superheroic figure of young Marcel, whose impossible physical feats are reminiscent of Superman, and can only be accepted against such a background.

Thus, The Begum's Fortune becomes a didactic fable, and the gruesome end of its evil genius Schultz is as satirical as it is satisfying. Marcel, penetrating again into the city of steel, sees the body of Schultz through an enormous window like a magnifying lens, frozen by his own invention. "Like a mammoth buried in the polar regions, the corpse had been there for a month, hidden from every eye."

Themes

In spite of all their futuristic and Utopian qualities, Verne's writings are strongly influenced by nineteenth century issues: nationalism, the American dream, and the possibilities of science. Jules Verne is famous for his powers to anticipate the future, intended to invoke in the reader awe and wonder at the possibilities of science. The Begum's Fortune, however, also explores its darker aspects. One of the most terrifying is probably the first attempt in literature of describing an artificial attack satellite. Even though Verne made several erroneous technical assumptions, it is a grim forecast of mega-military destruction through science. Generally, Verne saw science in a positive light. To a son of the late nineteenth century, a century which had seen wonderful and tremendous technical advances, technology could be a very beneficial force. Yet he was also a realist, and The Begum's Fortune was a product of his later years, when he became increasingly pessimistic, and aware of the dark side of progress. It is more than poetic justice when Schultz becomes prey of his own wicked deeds. He is killed by the same poisonous gas that he planned to use against his innocent neighbors. While science is neither good nor bad, it can be both in people's hands.

The American Dream, or perhaps better called the American Mirage, is another theme that appears in this novel, as well as in some of his other works.

When Verne cast Americans in later novels, they did not exactly compliment their country's image. Frequently, they are exaggerated eccentric millionaires. But he did have an eye for the seemingly limitless possibilities of the continent. In his essay on Poe, he expressed his admiration for the eminently practical character of the American, but in De la Terre a la Lune (1864-1865), this admiration took on much more satirical overtones: "Now then, when an American has an idea, he looks for a second American who shares it. If there are three of them, they elect a president and two secretaries." Just as in the case of science in general, the possibilities of the New World are undoubtedly there. It is not an accident, that both Herr Schultz and Dr. Sarrasin select the remote Oregon Coast, a little known part of a huge continent, for their projects.

The Begum's fortune Yet the unlimited possibilities offered by the country turn into a huge financial bubble when Herr Schultz's empire collapses, threatening to destroy the entire American economy. "All they (the creditors) could do was to unite in a general body, and agree to address a request to the Congress to ask it to take their case in hand, espouse the interests of its nationals, pronounce the annexation of Stahlstadt to American territory, and thus bring this monstrous creation under the general laws of civilization. Several members of the Congress were personally interested in the business, the request was tempting to the American character, and there was reason to believe that it would be crowned with complete success." The possibilities have been misused by the selfish interests of the people involved.

This disillusionment with the "Land of Opportunity" may date back to impressions that Verne formed during his own journey to the American East Coast, and is found in many of his later works.

Nineteenth-century nationalism was another major element that influenced Verne to a certain extent, and nowhere more notably than in The Begum's Fortune.

While the most colorful and loveable characters in his novels, such as Passepartout, are French, in this novel the lines are closely drawn, and being French is almost synonymous with being "good".

In most of his novels, Verne shows considerable tolerance for other nations and cultures. All have virtues—the English are logical and stoic, the Russians are courageous and loyal, and most other nationalities have qualities that recommend them. But when Verne wrote The Begum's Fortune, the Franco-Prussian war was still throwing a shadow over France, and the German industrialist Schultz becomes a wicked carricature of his countrymen. "The Professor had heard his rival's intentions to build a French city where the physical and spiritual hygenic conditions would improve all the qualities of the race and create generations of young people who were strong and valiant. To him, this enterprise seemed both totally absurd, and destined to fail because it was contrary to the laws of Progress . . . . this project (Stahlstadt) was of secondary importance to Herr Schultz. It was only a small part of a much greater plan to destroy all those who refused to merge with the German people and become one with the Vaterland."

Adaptations

Many of Verne's novels have the suspense, thrills and action to provide good material for modern films. However, The Begum's Fortune is not as well known as some of his other publications, and its only English translation by O. I. Evans was not published until 1958 by Ace books in a series intended to familiarize readers with the lesser known works of Verne. In addition, its strong, satirical character and strong anti-German sentiment make this novel poorly suitable for filming.

Key Questions

Like many Utopias, Verne's France Ville appears to be an ideal place. A closer look, however, may reveal definite shortcomings. Since the well being of the community is placed above that of the individual, personal freedom and independence sometimes are limited. In this way, France Ville is, perhaps, closer to Stahlstadt than it appears. A discussion of Verne's ideal city as well as of Utopias in general will raise a number of interesting topics. It may also lead to a comparison with other celebrated Utopias like the one by Sir Thomas More, or of anti-utopias like Voltaire's Candide (1759).

1. Like many science fiction writers, Verne believed that the future could bring an improved society. What are some of the ideals that he demonstrates in his plans for France Ville?

2. The Begum's Fortune is a satire that criticizes a number of issues. In the opening chapter, Verne takes the law profession to task through the lawyers that handle Dr. Sarrasin's inheritance. Are there any other groups or professions that are ridiculed?

3. The true hero of the novel is Marcel, a young man from the Alsace region.

Considering the political background of the novel, is there any significance in the choice of Marcel's home region?

4. Why does professor Schultz hate the French? What is the significance in Verne's repeated referral to Schultz and Sarrasin as the Saxon vs. the Celt? What is Schultz's opinion of non-Germans?

5. Dr. Sarrasin has a son, Otto. What is his role? Note that he seems to disappear after the first two chapters, only to reappear at the very end.

6. What is the guiding principle of Stahlstadt? A modern writer would probably object to it on environmental grounds? What are Verne's objections?

After Schultze's death, France Ville takes over the manufacturing plants. Would this be compatible with our ideas of humane values? Is it compatible with Verne's attitudes? Is it a sign of nineteenth-century attitude toward technology and progress?

7. Would late twentieth-century readers like to live in France Ville? Why or why not?

8. Professor Schultz is not vanquished by the inhabitants of France Ville but by his own invention. Is this significant?

What does Verne imply about the nature of evil?

9. After Professor Schultz disappears, there is much confusion, especially at the stock exchange. What is Verne's purpose in going to so much detail about these economic

effects? Is he just building up suspense, or does he point out the effect of technology on the economy?

10. A number of literary critics and writers have pointed out the role of science fiction in preparing us for the future. Do Verne's works fulfill this function? What future does he foresee?

Literary Precedents

The Begum's Fortune is a fantasy novel, and part of what we today call science fiction. Verne was one of the first to use the genre, a mix of futuristic technology and adventure. His influence on other writers of science fiction is enormous. H. G. Wells, who wrote such classics as the Time Machine (1895; see separate entry), and War of the Worlds (1898; see separate entry), recalled that during his early years he "was welcomed as a second Dickens, a second Bulwer Lytton, a second Jules Verne." Another heir to Verne is Edgar Rice Burroughs in his Mars stories, which are set in futuristic cities full of Utopian inventions.

Verne's scientific novels are a unique brand of industrial age literature, and have found their heirs in the twentieth as well as the nineteenth century. Arthur C. Clarke, William Tenn, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and Robert Sheckley are only a few of those who carried technology into the future, as Verne does in his Utopian and technological cities and societies.

The Begum's Fortune has also been classified as a Utopian novel. Verne certainly discusses an ideal future society in his France Ville. Like Francis Bacon's The New Atlantis, Sir Thomas More's Utopia (1516), certain portions of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726), and Samuel Johnson's Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia (1759), he has been fascinated with future possibilities, just as he has been fascinated with technical advancements beyond his time. But unlike the above mentioned writers, Jules Verne is primarily interested in the practical applications of his ideas about hygiene and city planning. His vision lacks an all-encompassing philosophy that shapes the Utopian societies.

While Thomas Moore, for instance, is deeply concerned with developing the moral qualities of his people to ensure an ideal society, Verne simply assumes that any inhabitants of his city are moral because of their perfect environment, and then turns to the exact description of his hospitals or housing units, following the concept of mens sana in corpore sano—a healthy mind being the logical result of a healthy body. Where most of the Utopian philosophers spend a lot of attention on an educational system to develop and sharpen the minds of their citizens, it is interesting that Verne does not mention any plans for schools to develop the moral and intellectual faculties of the people of France Ville. Rather than writing Utopias, he is, after all, writing science fiction.

Related Titles

In The Master of the World (1904), Verne created another inventor who is a criminal or near-criminal, a man driven outside the law by his ambition, and in the Astonishing Adventure of the Mission Barsac (1919) there is a town called Blackland which is ruled by a tyrant, Harry Killer. Blackland stands on one side of a river, and on the other shore Killer has erected a fortress complete with laboratories, like Stahl Stadt. Killer uses the inventions developed by his scientist Camaret for his own evil purposes until Camaret, learning the dreadful costs in life and suffering he has caused unwittingly, blows up the town by remote control.

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