

Paris au XXe siècle

J. Verne

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This book by Verne was rejected by his publisher and was lost and forgotten. Then it unexpectedly turned up, which was a minor sensation. Reading it one realizes that its main interest derives from a) its unexpected existence and b) that it is a futuristic fantasy and hence we are in position to compare it and judge how much he was off. Neither a) nor b) would have been the case at the time it was written and to be published.

One would suspect that it would be a technological extravaganza, in which Verne would give free vent to his imagination of spectacular inventions, but in fact there is little of that. Instead it is a kind of dystopia depicting a society in which science and technology reigns supreme, and the arts, such as painting, music and literature eke out a precarious existence mostly clandestine. The protagonist, by name of Michel, is a poet by heart and habit, and is not good for anything else. Due to the connection of his maternal uncle, who is in charge of an important bank, he is given a tedious occupation at their enterprise, which means that he can support himself but at the price of being almost a serf. He makes friends with his co-worker, who is a clandestine musician, and he gets in contact with his paternal uncle and his friend, a professor with a very pretty grandchild that is the cause of a burgeoning romance. In this way he can also enjoy the company of books and ancient, i.e. 19th century literature, which the few bookstores do not carry. But he is fired from his job at the bank and he has to fend for himself at an institute that produces plays for the theater, mostly taking old plays and re-staging them to make them more suitable to the tastes of the modern populace. He fails at every endeavor he is assigned to pursue and is moved from one department to another until he finally is thrown out. The winter of 1961-62 turns out to be very severe. It starts to snow early and the temperature drops to below minus twenty. Food is hard to come by and very expensive. He is on the verge of starving his meager savings melting by a fixed amount every day. He decides to spend his last money on some flowers for his love, and does so, only to find out that she and her grandfather have been evicted from their apartment and no one knows where. We follow his last hours wandering around a desolate Paris covered in snow.

So what does Verne envision of the future? A collective transportation system driven by pneumatic air. Not such a bad invention after all, it has actually been implemented in a few cities. Then some huge canal with locks has been erected along the Seine, making possible large ocean going vessels to get to Paris proper, with beneficial commercial aspects. But, as noted, the cultural life is very poor. People have no longer any taste for the arts, the great authors of the previous century are forgotten, and the books published mostly concern science and technology. The scarcity of books and bookstores makes one think of the present digital age, when books and private libraries are on their way out.

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