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Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

Jules Verne · *1869-1870 (French); English 1872-73 · Anonymous nineteenth-century English translation*

A supposed sea-monster is hunted, and three men are taken aboard a submarine, the Nautilus, whose motto is Mobilis in Mobili. Captain Nemo has done with society. The wonders of the deep are real, and so is a freedom that can become a law to itself.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What kind of man has "done with society entirely," and can Professor Aronnax, Ned Land, and Conseil remain his guests—or prisoners—without losing the chance to return to the living?

"I am not what you call a civilised man! I have done with society entirely, for reasons which I alone have the right of appreciating."

Captain Nemo · Chapter X, The Man of the Seas, when Aronnax speaks of a civilised man

Nemo is generous, learned, and bitter. He shows Aronnax a sea that "is everything," fights sharks and ships, and will not explain his war. Ned Land wants liberty and meat; Conseil wants to follow his master; Aronnax is torn by knowledge and by duty. They escape at last in a maelstrom. The book never makes Nemo a simple villain or a simple hero: he is a man who has judged the world and withdrawn under the waves.

KEY CHARACTERS

Professor Aronnax
Narrator, a man of science, torn between the Nautilus as a marvel and as a prison.

Captain Nemo
Master of the Nautilus: generous, proud, and finished with the land's laws, for reasons he keeps as his own.

Ned Land
A Canadian harpooner who wants freedom, a steak, and a way back to the air.

Conseil
Aronnax's servant, loyal and classifying, who follows his master into the sea.

DONE WITH SOCIETY

> *"I am not what you call a civilised man! I have done with society entirely, for reasons which I alone have the right of appreciating."*
> **Captain Nemo** · Part I, Chapter X

> *"The sea is everything. It covers seven-tenths of the terrestrial globe. Its breath is pure and healthy."*
> **Captain Nemo** · On his love of the sea

Grades 6–8
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
A Shifting Reef
PART I, CHAPTERS I–VII

Reports of a fast, shining "monster" bring Professor Aronnax and his servant Conseil onto the frigate Abraham Lincoln, with the harpooner Ned Land. They strike the thing and are thrown overboard.

- The year 1866 is "signalised by a remarkable incident."
- Aronnax at first takes the creature for a narwhal or an unknown reef.
- Ned's harpoon and a collision prove that the monster is harder than flesh.

02
Mobilis in Mobili
PART I, CHAPTERS VIII–XII

They are taken into a marvelous undersea ship. Its motto, above an N, is Mobilis in Mobili. Captain Nemo sets the terms: they may live aboard, but they may not leave.

- The abduction is sudden; the three men must accept hospitality that is also captivity.
- Electricity, food from the sea, and a library astonish Aronnax.
- Nemo refuses the name "civilised" and forbids any appeal to society's laws.

> *"MOBILIS IN MOBILI"*
> Part I, Chapter VIII, the motto on the Nautilus

03
The Sea Is Everything
PART I, CHAPTERS XIII–XXIV

Hunts in underwater forests, a visit to Ceylon's pearl fisheries, a burial in a coral cemetery: the Nautilus is a world. Nemo's kindness and his secrecy travel together.

- Aronnax is enchanted; Ned is not satisfied.
- They walk on the bottom of the sea and see wonders no museum holds.
- The coral kingdom chapter shows Nemo burying one of his own, a first hint of war and of a people he will not name.

> *"The sea is everything. It covers seven-tenths of the terrestrial globe. Its breath is pure and healthy."*
> **Captain Nemo** · When Aronnax asks if he likes the sea

04
Vigo, Ice, and a Vanished Continent
PART II, CHAPTERS I–XVI

The voyage goes to the Mediterranean, to a sunken treasure at Vigo Bay, to Atlantis, and under the ice to the South Pole. An accident nearly suffocates them.

- Nemo has a private treasury and a private justice; he takes gold where empires sank it.
- The polar ice and a shortage of air are trials of the ship's pride.
- Ned's patience grows thin; escape plans begin to be more than talk.

05
The Poulps, a Ship, and the Maelstrom
PART II, CHAPTERS XVII–XXIII

A fight with giant poulps, an attack on a warship, and Nemo's terrible grief decide the prisoners. They leave the Nautilus in a boat and are swallowed by the maelstrom off Norway; Aronnax survives to write.

- Nemo's war, hinted from the first, becomes open and awful.
- Aronnax still cannot hate him simply; he can no longer stay.
- The last sight of the Nautilus is in the whirlpool; Nemo's end is not told for certain.

Freedom and Exile · Wonder · Pride and Judgment · Loyalty · A Law to Oneself

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–8

1. The hosted text is the anonymous nineteenth-century English translation of Project Gutenberg #164 (the catalogue notes English 1872–73). It uses British spelling ("civilised," "signalised"). This is not a modern retranslation; some names and numbers differ from later English versions.
2. Nemo's refusal is: "I am not what you call a civilised man! I have done with society entirely, for reasons which I alone have the right of appreciating."
3. The motto on the Nautilus is printed as "MOBILIS IN MOBILI" over the letter N.
4. "Twenty thousand leagues" is the length of the voyage under the sea, not a descent to that depth.
5. Nemo's war against ships, and the history he will not tell, are left partly dark in this volume. Do not invent a full biography the hosted text does not give.

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