Milan Rastislav Štefánik and Jules Janssen: A Scientific Collaboration in Meudon (1905–1907)

In 1904 Milan Rastislav Štefánik, a young astronomer who was only 24 years old and a recent graduate of Prague university, arrived in Paris with a dream: to contribute to the science of astronomy. Lacking financial resources and with only a limited knowledge of French, he made himself known to the Meudon Observatory, a prestigious institution headed by Jules Janssen who was a leading figure in astrophysics. Janssen was impressed by Štefánik's determination and talent; he decided to give him a chance and hired him as assistant in 1905. This chance encounter marked the beginning of a decisive scientific collaboration that would influence not only Štefánik's career, but also the history of astronomy.

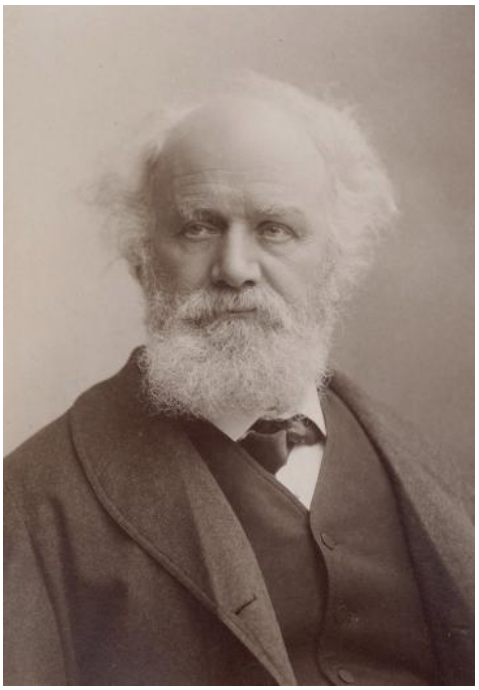
In Meudon, Štefánik soon specialised in solar astronomy which was a rapidly expanding field. Under Janssen's guidance, he focused on studying the solar corona, the luminous and mysterious envelope surrounding the Sun. Using spectroscopes – instruments used to analyse the light emitted by stars – Štefánik studied the spectral lines of the solar corona. His research led to several scientific articles published in the *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des sciences*, which quickly earned him recognition in the astronomical community.

But Štefánik was not content to work solely from the Meudon Observatory. He also took part in international missions to observe solar eclipses, rare events during which the moon temporarily masks the sun allowing the solar corona to be studied with unparalleled precision. Between 1905 and 1907, he travelled to Spain, Russia and later Tonga, where he collected valuable data on the structure and composition of the solar corona. These expeditions which were often perilous and demanding, strengthened his reputation and opened doors to the international scientific community.

The relationship between Štefánik and Janssen went beyond the purely professional. Janssen, nearing the end of his career, saw Štefánik as a potential successor. He offered him privileged access to rare resources and introduced him to Parisian scientific circles, where the young astronomer was able to exchange ideas with the greatest names of the time. Štefánik, grateful, continued Janssen's legacy after his death in 1907 pursuing his work on the Sun and organising new expeditions. This mentoring relationship illustrates the importance of knowledge transfer in science, where each generation builds on the discoveries of previous ones to move forwards.

In 1907, Štefánik was rewarded for his contributions by receiving the Jules Janssen Prize, the highest distinction awarded by the Astronomical Society of France. This official recognition cemented his work and placed him among the most promising astronomers of his generation. After this prosperous period in Meudon, Štefánik, although still active in the scientific field, began to engage in international missions combining astronomy, meteorology and diplomacy.

Today, the Meudon Observatory remains an iconic symbol of this collaboration. A statue of Štefánik, unveiled in 1999, stands in the gardens, commemorating his time there and his contributions. Every year, commemorative ceremonies are held there, attended by Slovak and French representatives, celebrating both his scientific legacy and his role in Franco-Slovak history. Meudon thus symbolises the friendship between the two nations, but also the importance of international cooperation in science.



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Sources :

« Štefánik se spécialise rapidement dans l'astronomie solaire sous la direction de Janssen. » **Source** : Lequeux, J. (2007). *Jules Janssen : Le père de l'astrophysique moderne*. Société Astronomique de France, p. 45.

« Ses recherches aboutissent à la publication de plusieurs articles scientifiques dans les Comptes rendus de l'Académie des sciences. » **Source** : Štefánik, M. R. (1906). *Sur la couronne solaire*. *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des sciences*, 142. Consulté sur Gallica.