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CHAPTER 1

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*Island Adrift:*  
*1828–35*

IN 1826, FRANCE was a constitutional monarchy. After the Napoleonic escapades, economic stability and artistic creativity were helping the cultural center of the world to find her feet again.

Nantes could be considered the Berwick or Berlin of Brittany: the French invasion had left this capital stranded from its cultural hinterland, with only islands of Breton speakers remaining. The city had an important middle class: conventional, complacent, and closed to outsiders, trying hard to ignore the rural discharge and exotic whiffs all around. Memories were fading of the *Boudeuse* and the *Méduse*, respectively the ships of the first French circumnavigation and horrifying acts of live cannibalism. Nantes still occupied the apex of the triangular trade—importing tropical raw materials, exporting trinkets, and moving slaves sideways—that, from this city alone, had dumped a half-million Africans in the West Indies and Indian Ocean. But with Haitian independence in 1804 and silt in the Loire, the triangle seemed increasingly wobbly. Many of the vessels were now square-sailed barges trans-shipping the tobacco and raw sugar up from Paimboeuf. For the moment, though, the prohibition of “black ebony,” as the merciless slavers called their stock in trade, had merely increased Nantes’s monopoly and hence prices.

It was this colorful setting, built on a trade already abhorrent to an enlightened few, that Jules Verne saw when he first opened his eyes. He also breathed in an illustrious family heritage.

“Verne” means alder tree, as in the family coat of arms. The first recorded ancestor was one Vital Verne, a sixteenth-century shoemaker in the Massif Central (see Figure 1).

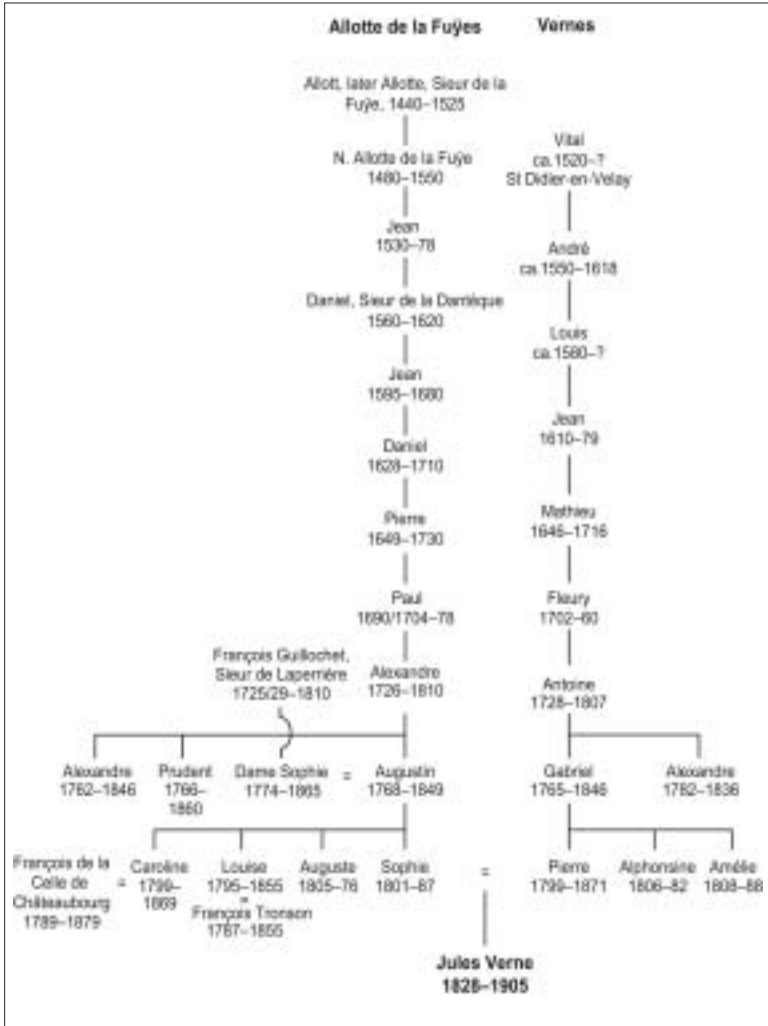


Figure 1: Jules Verne's family tree

His ultimate forebears may have been either Italian or from Le Vernet, in Thélis la Combe commune, a little downstream from La Versanne.<sup>1</sup> Starting with Vital's son, the descendants were invariably lawyers, although another branch founded the famous Banque Vernes. After an eighteenth-century Antoine, senior legal advisor, came a Jean-Gabriel, seigneur of Cormantin and Uxelles, and his cousin Gabriel, magistrate in Provins, south of Paris.

Gabriel's third child, Pierre Verne, spent a few months as an advocate in Paris, then settled in Nantes to join his long-established uncle. In late 1826 this half-Parisian bought, on credit, into Monsieur Paquetteau's practice on 2 Quai Jean Bart (JJV 2). Looking out onto Feydeau Island, the building stood at the corner where the Loire absorbed the Erdre, which François I called "the most beautiful river in France."<sup>2</sup> Despite the virtual closed shop operated by the local legal establishment, Pierre aimed to build the best law practice in Nantes. His social background and literary taste helped, and he had the gravitas. He began to expand the practice's client list into the lucrative marine business, including slave traders.

In an oil painting, Monsieur Verne appears unexceptional beside a small rolltop desk, with perfect order presiding over his paper cutter and blotter. Later photographs reveal that the lawyer is tall and ascetic and likes to spread his arms proprietorially. Longish light brown hair and a devotion to paperback fiction mitigate his balding pate, grim face, and thin lips.

Pierre's grandson described him as "highly intelligent, pleasant, and witty, a passionate music lover, the life and soul of our family get-togethers" (JJV 2). His great-grandson remembered "a good and charming man under a slightly severe appearance . . . A respected legal expert, an erudite scholar, and a fine spiritual poet, he liked to discuss science and recent discoveries" (JJV 2). He was remarkably liberal and open-minded in some ways, and Jules dubbed him "a veritable saint."<sup>3</sup>

But saints are impossible to live with. Pierre was also a strict Jansenist, a stickler for detail, and a puritan who despised the poets'



Was it urgent? In any case, the wedding took place without most of Pierre's family, five days away in Provins (ADF 10).

Sophie, without profession, came from Morlaix and was gentle, gay, and superimaginative. Following an intensively Breton education, she took Catholic devotion to extremes (JJV 3). Whether one was considered Breton by "real" locals resembled being a genuine Scot or Hong Konger, the hardliners using a mix of ill-defined criteria like blood, birth, and upbringing to exclude the outsiders. Like Gaelic or Cantonese, the language was of little currency but central to the myth. Morlaix itself was synonymous with the tragic French-speaking Acadians, brutally sent "home" from British North America before being dispersed to Louisiana.

Sophie's father, Augustin (b. 1768), ran the indirect taxation system in Nantes but had previously been manager of Huelgoat Forge; the family went back, via Sophie's slave-trading grandfather and military and naval ancestors, to a Daniel Allotte, Sieur de la Fuÿe. Both families in fact overflowed with nobles, including seigneurs de Montbel, Chignet de Champrenard, de la Perrière, de la Dantèque, and du Sapt, as well as many humble *dés* that at least indicated an aspiration towards nobility. Pierre was himself an *écuyer* (member of the gentry), his arms emblazoned on a seal passed down since time immemorial (RD 2). All the relatives led prosperous existences: the four parents were to live to an average of 86.

In an oil painting symmetrical to Pierre's, again painted by her artist brother-in-law, Sophie appears thoughtful beside a keyboard, hands at awkward angles and dress scraping as she leans forward. But in another, ten years later, a country lass wears a simple shawl, straggly hair, and an expression mixing sadness, kindness, and wryness. Her one surviving letter shows affection and naivety, together with mountains of religiosity.

Despite his family's extensive landholdings, Pierre claimed to be badly off and moved in with the bride's parents. Augustin and Dame Sophie Allotte de la Fuÿe (b. 1774) rented the fourth floor of 4 Rue

de Clisson for FF 200 a month (about \$600 in modern-day values). With four main rooms plus a study and attic above, the apartment was finely furnished, boasting arched doors and elaborate parquet (ADF 10). On the walls hung stern portraits of Sophie's grandfathers, a Feydeau shipowner and a mariner who had braved the Arctic (ADF 11). However, Augustin signally failed to live up to their scrutiny, for his mother had died bearing him, his business ventures kept failing, and he was always away gambling and womanizing. A few months later he moved out for good.<sup>5</sup>

No. 4 stood on the corner of Rue Kervégan, the broad avenue bisecting Feydeau, built by the great slave traders, no doubt including Augustin's father. It was not a natural island, and is no longer one, surrounded as it is by expressways; but it was then *the* place to live, a boat-shaped haven at the heart of town. A charming gouache by J. M. W. Turner, done that same year, shows the classical terraces of Quai Duguay-Trouin, bonneted pumpkin sellers, and remarkably junk-like boats nestling on a too-broad Loire. The island's checkered history showed in the visible subsidence and the street names: Jean Bart and René Duguay-Trouin were buccaneers, Clisson an Anglo-French turncoat.

At noon on 8 February 1828, Jules-Gabriel saw the light of day. It seems typical of Pierre that his son should emerge in the earliest month allowed by society. A mere three hours later, the birth certificate was signed. Accompanying Pierre to the registry office was François Tronson (1787–1855), Sophie's brother-in-law and magistrate, neighbor, and family friend.<sup>6</sup> This was the family's first Julius/Jules (the names are the same in French), called after the Roman emperor, a fourth-century Breton martyr, and a pope with three children. The boy was also named for grandfather Gabriel and the Archangel of that name.

Although wet nurses were normal, the infant was probably breast-fed.<sup>7</sup> Baptism did seem urgent, for a third of babies were lost and Jules would have risked limbo without it. Indeed Jules's probable cradle mate, Léontine, born to the Tronsons two months after, was to

die at the age of one; her sister, Céline, had also been lost in 1823. Pierre had excellent church connections, and a quickie baptism was conducted the following day with special permission from the bishop.

To calm the baby's crying, Pierre probably used the unconventional method of reading out long passages from contemporary literary works.<sup>8</sup> Sophie sang songs over the cradle, fed her baby on demand, planted kisses, and often stayed watching him all night.<sup>9</sup>

The official christening provides an opportunity to meet the relatives. To allow Pierre's family to travel in better weather, it takes place on May Day, in the nearby Holy Cross Church, with an ornate façade but rather a dumpy behind. Built into a column near the door opens a giant seashell, large enough to bathe a baby. Gabriel and Dame Sophie are the godparents; Pierre's pretty sisters, Alphonsine and Amélie, also attend, barely out of their teens, but already interchangeably old-maidish (ADF 9).

For the banquet, although really it should be the debauched Augustin, Dame Sophie's second brother-in-law presides at the top table. This bachelor and eccentric is Jules's great-uncle, but everyone calls him Uncle Prudent. A former shipowner, buccaneer, and triangular trader, he has retired to gentleman-farming in the village of Brains, where he has just become mayor. Despite his age, he often walks all the way to Nantes (ADF 10).

During a lull, one of the beautiful Provins maiden aunts turns to her brother:

“This child has your eyes, but your wife's nose and mouth. He will be a poet like you and manipulative and kind-hearted like Sophie . . .”

“My son will be a lawyer like me, and I'm counting on his domain being a prosperous practice.”

Pierre has in fact cut into an important oration by Prudent about the Scottish origins of the family. Prior to discreetly slipping away, therefore, we should hear the good uncle out:

“Before becoming shipowners here, the Allottes lived for seven

generations at Loudun, in Poitou, in a manor house smaller than my press-house, but whose *tourelle* [turret] dovecote exercised a right of *fuye* [feudal right] over the neighboring fields. Hence our name . . . As for the name Allotte, it comes to us from a certain Allotted, a Scottish archer, who . . .”

“Here he goes again,” interrupts Pierre. “Uncle Prudent’s getting started about the legend of Louis XI’s archer and his Scottish domain” (ADF 11).

On the face of it, this story of British ancestry might indeed seem mere hearsay, as the lawyer here alleges and biographers have often assumed. Before she died, however, Verne’s great-niece Marie-Thérèse Lassée provided further tantalizing snippets:

In 1462, N. Allott, a Scot who had come to France with Louis XI’s Scottish Guard, rendered service to the King, who ennobled him and gave him the “droit de fuye,” the right to have a dovecote, at that time a royal privilege. He built the Château de la Fuÿe near Loudun, and became Allotte, Seigneur de La Fuÿe.<sup>10</sup>

The Scottish Archers of Louis XI, king from 1461 to 1483, are well documented, the hundred members being from the best pedigrees. A *fuye* (*fuye* in the Poitou region) means a small dovecote, usually on pillars, in other words a *tourelle*. The name Allott is unknown in France, Allotte in English. Daniel Allotte’s grandson, Paul, lived in Martaizé, six miles south of Loudun. The “Ancestors” file in the Centre International Jules Verne in Amiens contains an anonymous family tree. Amazingly, it begins “Allott, Sieur de la Fuÿe, 1440–1525” and “N. Allotte de la Fuÿe, 1480–1550.” Although it contains no further information, the dates must come from family documents. In sum, the Caledonian ancestry does seem probable.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately an unsuspected but incontrovertible keystone survives. The Château de la Fuÿe, the home of the proto-Allotte de la Fuÿe, is still standing, on the southwestern outskirts of Loudun. Curiously, no biographer has thought of looking for it in the phone

book. The surprise on locating the legendary building could not be greater than at discovering Captain Nemo to be a pensioner in a seaside boardinghouse.

In yellow freestone, with 600 feet of façade, castellation, moat, and drawbridge, the château, built in about 1465, boasts three internal towers for pigeons, plus two external *fuies*. The owner, Monsieur Jacques Lallemand, has confirmed that the property belonged to the Allotte de la Fuÿes, as indicated by the coats of arms (“Gules with golden crescent”) formerly in the stonework.<sup>12</sup>

The evidence, in sum, for the existence of N. Allott, Scoto-French noble, and hence of British forefathers, is compelling. Even if we do not believe in “blood,” the Scottish ancestry mixing in with the Breton surely conditioned the Allottes’ attitude to the British. Given the love-hate relationship between the two nations, an Allotte could never be just another French citizen. From the beginning, Jules carried a great weight of tradition on his infant shoulders.

After less than a year, the Verne family moved to 2 Quai Jean Bart. If Pierre was seeking peace from his mother-in-law, he made a mistake, since his home and office were now one and the same (JJV 2). What was more, the new dwelling stood across a narrow channel from Dame Sophie’s, meaning she could peer inside. However, to drop in she had to make a wide detour.

As administrator of the Catholic charity that owned the building, François Tronson no doubt arranged the rental. Sophie’s brother-in-law was the son of yet another triangular sea captain, “punctual and methodical” (RD 9) and a convinced Legitimist (supporter of Charles X): he went so far as to resign as magistrate in protest at the 1830 Revolution that removed the king from the throne. From 1819 to the mid-1820s, François and Louise Tronson had lived at 14 Rue Kervégan, 20 feet from Jules’s birthplace.

As the first floor flooded every few years, 2 Quai Jean Bart had been converted to shops, rather lowering the tone (ADF 8). Above rose a mezzanine, two high-ceilinged stories with six windows apiece,

then mansarded maids' rooms. Colorful wall hangings, tropical-wood furniture, and Chinese porcelain adorned the interior. The house was terraced in Louis XVI style, corresponding to Georgian style. Like Jules's birthplace, it had internal shutters and an unsafe-looking wrought-iron balcony on each window. And no. 2 again stood on a corner, but now with a spectacular view over the Erdre, Feydeau, and the Loire.

Despite the five-story grandeur, the Vernes had only the thousand-square-foot middle floor, barely twice an Edinburgh living room, to accommodate an increasingly busy office and six people. As if to compensate, the block appears in an 1828 gouache by Turner—and in the jazzed-up version, retitled “Nantes from Feydeau Island” (1830). The river scene has now been Italianately remixed, with blue and red awnings on the gondolas, curlicues on the mansions, and Mediterranean fishing smacks invitingly lined up before Jules's windows. The pumpkins have been airbrushed out and the medieval Bouffay Tower behind Quai Jean Bart appealingly rounded off. The chiaroscuro irresistibly draws the eye from the left-hand focus, at the shady Verne residence, over a dusky arched bridge, to the obscure block at the right-hand focus, the boy's birthplace on Feydeau. Turner's eye for the ley-lines hidden in age-old thoroughfares uncannily coincides with the family's taste for dominant views.

On June 25, 1829, Pierre-Paul Verne was born, named after his father and the last Allotte to live on the de la Fuye domain. Jules lost his mother's attention but acquired a virtual twin, only 16 months younger. Paul and he would become very close; even the difference in size fading as they grew up.

Jules was a slender, handsome child, with curly reddish-golden hair, large blue eyes, and a broad nose. His main weakness was a love for venturing out onto the perilous balconies.

By modern standards, his early years were uncomfortable. The apartment had a toilet with a disposal tube but no flush mechanism or toilet-paper, and no bathroom or hot tap. In the kitchen, the only reliably warm room, with its Aga stove and tempting smells, the two

young live-in maids gave Jules a window on the earthy traditions of the Breton countryside. One was called Mathurine, who later married a pork butcher from Chantenay, Monsieur Pâris (ADF 100). An affectionate pre-Proustian portrait, superstitious and humorously wary, lives on in the opening chapters of *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, whose manuscript hints at goings-on with her employer.

While checking what Mathurine was up to, Sophie had the leisure to play the piano, *con brio*; read books, so long as she avoided atheists and free-thinkers; or simply dream of her boys' futures: terrible womanizers like her father, desiccated lawyers like the rest of the family, or incurable romantics like herself?

Jules's first memory dated from July 29–30, 1830, when he heard strange crackling noises coming down the Erdre. His parents explained to him, with worried looks, that rough men were fighting with guns. The windows remained tightly shut despite the heat, and he had to sit quietly. When he later recounted "I can still hear the rifle shots . . . [as] the population fought the royalist troops" (MCY), he was surely echoing long-gone voices. His parents made it sound as though the people were the troublemakers on the liberal barricades in Place Graslin, when 16 men died.

Since the living room took much of the apartment, the bedrooms lurked at the back. Jules's room must have looked out onto the side street, Rue du Vieil Hôpital, poky but countrified, with the view to the right blocked by a bend, and that to the left offering a narrow vision of the Erdre and the houses on the far bank. He may also have had a window on the back courtyard, really just an air shaft, where you had to crane your neck to see the least scrap of sky.

His early environment was incredibly rich. Even before he stepped out, his senses were assailed by coffee, cocoa, sugar, indigo, and mangoes, by ship repairs, seamen's arguments, mewing seagulls, and clip-clopping carriages. From the living room he could clearly see the houses on Feydeau, the mascarons above each window, stonily pupilless but winged to catch the sea breeze: faces transfigured by some unseen horror, angelic breeze-puffers, jovial mustachioed buccaneers.

Quayside ships literally overshadowed the front door, with dockyard cranes behind. Jules could watch each tide bringing in the sardine boats, brigs, or huge, leaning Cape Horners, salt water when the moon lent her help, and, once in a blue moon, a lost porpoise. If the west wind dropped and the Loire was high, skill was needed to luff into the Erdre, meaning that Jules learned about nautical operations at an early age.

The dark *raison d'être* of most of the vessels would have been hidden from the child. The city continued to run about half the French trade in human beings. Admittedly, the commerce in slaves, although not the keeping, had been banned in 1827. But with her tradition for flouting far-off regulations, Nantes simply resorted to flags of convenience and brig conversions outside French waters. As her stranglehold increased, the port armed hundreds of slave ships in the 1820s, with 1830 representing a peak. In 1835, more than 80 Nantes captains continued the triangular trade.

Jules's own family took part, although they concealed the fact. Family biographer Marguerite de la Fuÿe drops hints about the family's "muscadin" behavior: foppish, Royalist, and tropically decadent. Pierre had arrived on the recommendation of Alexandre Verne (1782–1836), who married into the Bernier family, active in the slave trade (JJV 2). Uncle Alexandre, a former quartermaster, was himself some sort of businessman, like Sophie's father; Eugène (b. 1792) and his half-brother Gustave Allotte (b. 1801/02), Sophie's cousins a hundred yards up the Erdre, were shipowners, like most of the family friends and Dame Sophie's maternal grandfather.<sup>13</sup> Her paternal grandfather was a close associate of François Guillet de la Brosse, militia chief in the French colony of Santo Domingo (Haiti). The Allottes were related to René-Auguste Chateaubriand, father of the famous writer, René, and career captain of pirate slaving ships, crewed largely from Nantes. Uncle Prudent's savings, some of which would be bequeathed to Jules, must have come from buccaneering and slave trading.<sup>14</sup>

The real money in town came from the slave trade, and a whole

web of cross-links entangles Verne's extended family into the nexus of Feydeau Island, noble descent, reactionary politics, fervent Catholicism, shipowning, plantation management, and illicit tropical commerce. Some of the kindly relatives bouncing the infant on their knees had to be slave traders, with hundreds of deaths and thousands of ruined lives on their consciences.

Sophie worried about the dampness. At the first spring sun, she would walk her boy under the mature magnolias of Quai de la Fosse, which manages to look positively Neapolitan in Turner's 1828 oil of it. Jules's great-niece biographer throws in that the trees were "planted by the shipowners of Santo Domingo in memory of their houses, wrecked by the blacks" (ADF 14), another hint at dark doings in the family.

The quayside had walls higher than Jules's head, with tempting gaps and slippery steps down to the sewage-laden water, his mother's nightmare. But the boy's attention was especially captured by a man who hired boats for a franc a day. True, the boats had water sloshing around everywhere, but one of them, he noticed, had three masts, just like the real luggers (MCY). Jules, already a keen boat-spotter, was able to tell a gunwale from a poop, a schooner from a man-of-war.

Beside the Stock Exchange, within spitting distance of La Petite Hollande, Sophie and Jules would pass shops selling brown coconuts, pink seashells, and green pineapples. Nearer home, the bird shop on Quai Brancas displayed monkeys, parakeets, and canaries. On summer nights their gibberings and screeches echoed through the Verne apartment (ADF 14).

If they ever tired of watching the rivers' forced couplings, Jules and Paul played hide-and-seek in Dame Sophie's attic, among their great-grandfather's telescopes, sextants, and dusty correspondence. Their grandmother would tell stories of her father's naval feats against the British in the Seven Years' War.

To walk to Dame Sophie's Jules crossed the Pont de la Poissonnerie. By luck, Turner again acts as guide. He zooms in beside the

dark-sided bridge of 1830 to swivel left and pan out for a stunning Goya-like gouache of a muddy humpback thick with quarreling fish-wives. If Jules found it too noisy, he could head past the crawling shellfish, cod, and tuna of the Fish Market on Feydeau's stern, another Turner subject. He could then turn into Rue Kervégan, negotiating further pockets of loose change and baskets of shining seaweed crying "Fresh fish!", "Fine mussels!", "Live crab!" If he doubled back instead to Quai Dugay-Trouin, more wives would be boozily picnicking on the water's edge, calling out to passersby. But at least he could pretend to be studying the fish-shop-cum-swimming-establishment moored alongside, also drawn by the busy artist.

Along the shore docked tiny smacks from Atlantic port Le Croisic, selling fresh fish and shellfish and besieged by mewling seagulls. According to the family, Jules would dream of sailing off to sea and bringing back miraculous catches. What seems certain is that sixty years later, he was still yearning for the river scene and the forbidden sensual escape it offered:

Ships lined the wharves two or three deep . . . In my imagination, I climbed their shrouds, I scrambled to their topmast tables, I gripped the knobs of their masts. How I longed to cross the trembling boards from the quayside and tread their decks! (MCY).

The boy's surroundings showed surprising reversals. The rivers below his window regularly flowed upstream, choosing different moments to do so. Often the quays would flood, with horse-drawn vehicles and household punts braving the waves. In March the Loire would bring down fields of brown ice, and on the incoming tide Jules's island of birth would glide back out to sea, delighting and worrying him. In his mind, the normal categories became blurred by all these upheavals and inversions. The Indies, not too far downstream, belonged to both America and Asia. "The Isles" were in both river and ocean, lay both east and west. If terra firma could mysteriously

yield to the foot, an island drift like a boat, a boat feel like both a man and a woman, the river could be salty. Feydeau leaned at drunken angles and when the Erdre one day ran dry under the boy's window, little more was needed to set off his imagination. Natural and artificial, trees and masts, water and land, up and downstream, alive and dead irremediably melded in his mind. All his life he would suffer from left–right and east–west disorder, category confusion, and unquenchable pansexuality.

The family worshipped at Holy Cross, trying to steer Jules away from his sweet and toy shop, Au Rat Goutteux (The Gouty Rat).<sup>15</sup> Although Pierre would read James Fenimore Cooper to Jules,<sup>16</sup> with his *Last of the Mohicans* and Franco-British rivalry, in general he neglected his son. Sophie followed his example of strict discipline, while encouraging Jules to invent new games.

The parents would invite friends in to drink Uncle Prudent's homegrown Gros-Plant wine, including lawyer turned priest Monsignor Alloue, the aristocratic W. Arnous-Rivière, the ever-polite shipowner Monsieur Bourcard, and Monsieur Jean-Baptiste Coquebert, army paymaster-general and relative of Chateaubriand—reactionary defenders of the establishment one and all. Table talk would include Charles X's dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies, his subsequent abdication, and the accession of Louis-Philippe. It might range from the ongoing conquest of Algeria, via Morse's new telegraph, to the measles and whooping cough all the children seemed to be catching. Given Pierre's interests, the first passenger railway would have been discussed, as well as Walter Scott's death and the plans for street-lighting.

François Tronson, Charles Musseau, Alfred Guillon, and Pierre Verne recited their own poetry, sang their own songs, performed their own playlets, and played literary guessing games.<sup>17</sup> Pierre's compositions contained emphatic religious messages and witty allusions to those present. Jules and Paul, watching from the wings, laughed at the serious lawyer's antics, but wondered why the poems and plays bore so little relation to real life.

At 8 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fifty yards from Quai Brancas, Jules often visited his childless uncle and aunt, François and Caroline de la Celle de Châteaubourg. An accomplished miniaturist and a tobacco warehouse owner, Uncle Châteaubourg was not only the son of Charles-Joseph de la Celle de Châteaubourg (living in Place Graslin and also a miniaturist, who had painted Napoléon and Josephine), but also the nephew of Pauline or Bénigne de Chateaubriand, the writer's sister.<sup>18</sup> Uncle Châteaubourg would often tell Jules heroic stories of the New World, especially of his great-uncle's encounters with French trappers, Iroquois warriors, and bison swimming the Father of Waters. According to Uncle, Chateaubriand had gone to America to find the Northwest Passage to the Pacific before the British (ADF 15). (We now know that the writer invented many of his adventures while sailing home, not even getting as far as the Mississippi.)

A final item in Jules's early environment seems less edifying. Pierre's religious fervor led him to self-mortification: to reinforce his wavering faith he would probably fast or even physically punish himself. This masochistic flagellation, recorded by Jules's grandson, was applied with a scourge.<sup>19</sup> To perform it satisfactorily, to ensure that the thongs did the necessary damage, often required deft wrist-action and persistence. Although flogging was normal for ascetics or criminals, to do it oneself surely constituted a neurotic disorder and an appeal for help.

Jules perhaps heard muffled groans and moans. Did he possibly wander in one day to find his father in flagrante delicto? Did Mathurine the maid venture to show him lines of blood and pus on crumpled hair shirts? The boy could have no understanding of the sins Pierre punished himself for, whether committed by himself, with prostitutes, or with the maids, but his father's self-inflicted tortures may have marked him deeply.

Pierre also reputedly beat or starved his son, undoubtedly normal in that class and time. However, the father's transition from the unnatural self-mutilation to the searing pain he inflicted on his son,

whatever he might have done, may have created terrible doubts about its justice. Even a small boy could wonder whether the brilliant but twisted psyche constituted a fair judge and jury. In any case, the paternal violence caused certain harm and may have led to the timidity that blighted Jules's whole life.



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CHAPTER 2

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## *Chantenay Castaway: 1836–39*

AT THE TENDER AGE OF SIX, the boy was sent away to boarding school.<sup>1</sup> Mme Sambin's upper-class *pension* stood at 5 Place du Bouffay, where a public guillotine had operated a generation or so before.<sup>2</sup> It stood beside Turner's ruined medieval prison tower, less than a hundred yards from Jules's home, and—some compensation—near the sceptr'd isle, beside the splendid mansion that backdropped the quarreling fishwives.

Mme Sambin was the abandoned spouse of an Indies-bound naval officer. "Sambin must have left his wife in the middle of the honeymoon," reported one of her flock; "30 years later he still hadn't sent news."<sup>3</sup> The schoolmistress often assured her pupils that he had foundered on a desert island and would return, Crusoe-like, with man Friday and a green parrot on his shoulder (ADF 16–17). Did the child appreciate the human tragedy, the nature of male wanderlust? More probably, he believed every word, coming to equate tropical shipwreck with happiness. (The myth of ultramarine bathing and squeaky white sand hadn't yet been invented.) Verne's works would often refer to Lady Franklin, who lost her husband but never gave up hope, sending expedition after expedition in search of him. The heroine of *Mistress Branican* (1891) heads out herself, and finds her husband after 14 years.

Despite elderly Mme Sambin's gentleness, she had to whip a little to maintain discipline. Another punishment involved the culprit kneeling with donkey ears in the middle of the class. Rewards included being promoted from the shared benches of the *hoi polloi* to raised individual seats or hearing tales from Sinbad the Sailor or the Revolution. Her students debated whether her name meant "without bath" or "100 baths."<sup>4</sup> Mme Sambin's teaching consisted mostly of traditional values, plus a few games. Even at kindergarten level, schools took their job seriously, with much religious instruction. But Jules reserved much of his energy for the playground. Classmates recalled the eight-year-old as "fair-haired and slender . . . throwing himself into every game and physical activity . . . his hair blowing, energetically exercising on stilts or the bars."<sup>5</sup>

An invaluable record of Verne's family life survives, never published and existing in a single copy, authored by Jules's nephew Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve (1858–1930). According to this biographer, Jules and Paul attended school together, learning to read and write there, although Paul was a year behind. In most schools, the children learned different styles of writing, including italics and broad Gothic, the schoolmistress going around sharpening the quills to fit the exercise. All his life, Jules exhibited a remarkable facility at switching from bold upright, to typographical joined-on copperplate with curlicued capitals and parallel descenders, to minute italic scrawl, later the bane of researchers' eyes.

In the summer, Nantes became a dusty and oppressive place. Even Jules's playground on Quai Jean Bart seemed less pleasant, for the Erdre had been diverted. The dry trench resounded with picks and shouts from the construction of the Nantes–Brest Canal, eventually completed in 1836. A slender compensation for all the brouhaha and disruption was that no. 2 acquired the only gas lamps in the area. The Vernes escaped the town for entire summers to Uncle Prudent's, at no. 8 La Guerche, a hamlet adjoining the village of Brains, ten miles southwest of Nantes.<sup>6</sup>

The journey started from the Pont de la Poissonnerie on an

“unexplodable” steamboat, so called, Verne remarks dryly, “because it exploded a little less than the others” (MCY). But it came as a relief to leave the busy town center and feel the cool water underfoot.

Brains was a real country village, with only a shop and a forge. From the church, a private avenue led grandly through the high-walled estate, around a rather pondlike lake, and up to Prudent’s manor house. The property boasted a library, a vegetable garden, and an orchard. On the right stretched the wooded hills of Le Plessis-Cellier, featuring Uncle Châteaubourg’s ancestral château, complete with drawbridge. A stream known as the Ruisseau de la Sauvagerie linked the two uncles.<sup>7</sup> Also close by lived Paul and Juste Lucas-Championnière, old family friends, and distant relatives, prominent in Nantes society.

Prudent’s elegant manor suspiciously resembled three cottages run together. A single maid, often replaced, lived in, plus a score of servants and farm workers in the outbuildings. Prudent loved dogs, giving them unusual names like Nina or Raton, which Verne would put to good use in his fiction.

Jules and Paul adored Uncle Prudent, approaching seventy but still hale and hearty, because he had traveled to South America and told wonderful tales about his exotic adventures. With his bachelor freedom, pirate past, mayoral authority, great conviviality, private wines, and rich domain, he provided an important role model for the boys, especially compared with the flogger father.

Besides, the Tronson cousins, who lived very near Uncle Châteaubourg’s in Nantes,<sup>8</sup> often stayed at Uncle Prudent’s: five boys and two girls, Caroline and Marie. Whereas the elder was “lively and gay,” the younger had a pretty face and was “full of common sense . . . thoughtful, kind, and sensible.”<sup>9</sup> The nine children would play snakes and ladders with Prudent, run with sticks and hoops, or explore the countryside, paradisiacal with its heavy vines, lush meadows, and treacherous marshes.

But already Jules dreamt of an elsewhere, of the Isles, Indies, and Americas just around the bend. In his memory of these bucolic idylls,

he employed the same metaphors melding land and ocean, quick and dead, stasis and motion, as for Feydeau weighing anchor:

Since we were unable to sail the sea, my brother and I used to navigate the heart of the countryside, across meadows and woods. Not having a mast to climb, we would spend whole days in the treetops. We competed for the highest lookout. We chatted, read, hatched plans to travel, while the branches, shaken by the wind, simulated pitching and rolling.<sup>10</sup>

Jules in fact wrote down his travel plans, which constitute his earliest known writings. He also composed “invocations, some even in verse, that will never be published but opened out there, rocked by the breeze through the branches, like fruit or flowers.”<sup>11</sup> The religious upbringing clearly conditioned these delicate entreaties which, given their poetic form, may have been either magic spells or pleas for help with his efforts to delight cousins Caroline and Marie.

But the endless summers had to eventually come to a stop. Only too soon, it was back to the dusty city and the sludgy inkwells.

In understanding Jules’s early years, there is a huge problem: the absence of firsthand accounts. Various documents must have informed the three family biographers, but nothing has been divulged. Even Mme Sambin’s pupils signally failed to come forward with reminiscences of the most successful writer in the world. Did he have any friends? Pets? Did he like fish? Did he sleep with Paul? A total blank.

All the same, the first luster determines character, as the Jesuits famously opined. Jules’s seven-year-old personality emerged clearly.

First, his family exhibited a surprising stability. No deaths, no long-distance removals, no exotic holidays, no upsetting job changes, no further squalling babies, for some reason.

Second, torturing himself with his sensuality and guilt, Pierre the flagellator seems less of a positive influence than the six Allotte uncles

living close by. Although lawyer François Tronson lacked charisma, he did faithfully attend the family get-togethers and could bask in the reflection of the pretty girls he had engendered. Uncle Prudent and the two Uncles Châteaubourg, with their devotion to the arts, independence of mind, and talk of exhilarating foreign parts, formed fascinating figures. Collectively and individually, they molded Jules's character.

Many other influences stood out: Mathurine the maid, spoiling the boys as she stirred the *bourguignon* and dreamed of a husband; the excitement of watching maneuvering ocean vessels, with clove and nutmeg wafting in; the treacherous undertow of the Erdre–Loire confluence competing with the Atlantic influx; the perilous gargoyles, crooked caryatids, and louche aristocratic air of Feydeau mixing with the noisy street life; the memories of pirates, rebels, and slaves on every corner; the tastes in music, painting, and literature that the upper-class family had the leisure to indulge; the family names commemorating an aristocratic dovecote and a precocious tree partial to river banks; the four grandparents living to ripe old ages; and the glorious ancestors, whether infinite ramifications of seriously successful lawyers or rich owners sending killing fleets off to Africa's shores.

But the biggest influence, surely, came from a nobleman from an impossibly remote time and space. The romance of Scotland dominated the contemporary imagination with its adventure on savage mountains and lakes, but the forebear had sailed the sea and far away, defended King Louis XI, built himself a castle, and bequeathed his fiery hair-color and temperament.

It proved all too much for a sensitive child. The pressure from towering ancestors, shady businessmen, separated grandparents, spinster aunts, and frustrated schoolmistress combined with Pierre's beatings to make the boy shy to the point of neurosis. His communing with nature, his thirst for exoticism, his poetry, his longings for faraway places, his love of heights—all constituted signs of the expectations thrust onto him by disappointed adults. Jules reportedly loved only three things in life: freedom, music, and the sea.<sup>12</sup> Not a person in

view! In his marine-scented but landlocked childhood, school and family forced him to hide his affections deep and to be masochistically evasive in speaking, if not writing, his yearnings.

“The sea! Well neither I, nor my brother, who became a sailor a few years later, knew it yet,” he remarks flatly sixty years on (MCY). How many lost paradises can be read in that calm regret!

Sometimes, though, Jules overcame his timidity. At the age of eight his family took him to Paris and probably to Provins, sleeping overnight in the brougham August 14, 1850. (Given the very large number of references to Verne’s letters, an abbreviated system is adopted here, consisting simply of the date of composition. “50” of course means 1850; all such letters until chapter 10 are to his parents unless indicated otherwise; where part of the date is in italics, this means that information has been interpolated.)<sup>13</sup>

One fine day Jules ventured fearfully onto a three-master moored at the Quai de la Fosse, while the watchman was “on duty in a nearby tavern” (MCY). Ecstatically leaning over the open hatches, the boy sensually breathed in the tarry spices. He delighted in the marine bouquets of the interior and dreamed of making the cabin his home. Finally he dared to turn the wheel, in his imagination ocean bound on a good wind. In his naive rapture, he failed to understand the acrid smell from the unwashed human cargo of the trade triangle’s middle leg.

Jules’s earliest known document, a letter to Aunt Caroline Châteaubourg, revealed a loving home environment:

I’d like you to come and see us . . . and then can you bring the small telegraphs you promised as paul will also have one paul loves you with all his heart I’m writing this letter because paul doesn’t know how to write he’s only just started and I’ve been at boarding school over a year now and how is Uncle.

[Great-]Auntie Verne arrived from La Rochelle . . . not long ago before her brother wrote in his letter a terrible piece of news that her husband [Alexandre] had died my grandma Mummy

Auntie Tronson . . . know our two cousins henri and edmond  
are at high school in canbon [Cambon?] they don't know . . .  
My dear aunt and uncle I kiss you both with all my heart.<sup>14</sup>

This charming, period-less missive, addressed from Lorient,<sup>15</sup> eighty miles from Nantes, showed the impact of a middle-class education, using the aunts' surnames and self-consciously displaying concern for others, especially Paul. Jules's pride shone at being able to write; but the letter hardly shows a precocious interest for advanced technology, for the "telegraphs" must be toy semaphores.

At this time Uncle Châteaubourg painted two unnamed brothers posing on a verdant path of his Plessis-Cellier domain. One handsome reddish-blond boy, in waistcoat, English "redingote," raised collar, and tie, holds a hoop and stick, with the other's hand resting proprietorially on his shoulder. Despite the gorgeous colors, the portrait appears stilted. Somehow the boys do not come across as human beings, because of their self-conscious representation of adult values. The painting has invariably been described as showing Jules and Paul, but probably in fact depicts Henri and Edmond.<sup>16</sup>

The Tronson children represented Jules's only cousins in Brittany. Hilaire was four years younger, which left as playmates only Henri, Edmond, and Caroline, respectively four, three, and two years older, and Marie, two years younger. The children surely bathed together in the hot weather, following the new British fashion for communing with nature, giving the eight-year-old the perfect opportunity to satisfy his curiosity about girls' bodies, so different from his own.

Jules's letter and the stylized portrait gain poignancy from a disaster that struck his playmates that same year. On October 18, 1836, Henri and Edmond went duck hunting on the marshy Isles of Mauves-sur-Loire, ten miles east of Nantes.<sup>17</sup> One got into difficulty, disappearing under the water. The other tried to save him—and perished as well.<sup>18</sup> The scene of the homecoming of the two brothers stretched out in their drenched pallor can only be imagined, like the breaking of the news to Jules, a stranger to death.

The loss of the eldest children, the third and fourth in succession, must have shocked and horrified the whole family: the Tronson boy conceived a year later was morbidly called Henri-Edmond. Ducks would later play a prominent role in Verne's works, with hunting producing strong emotions, usually negative. His feelings about the surviving Tronsons, simultaneously friends and cousins, surely mixed inexplicable warmth and an ineffably tragic note.

With his practice prospering, Pierre rented a house in the hamlet of Chantenay, beside Nantes, in about 1837.<sup>19</sup> The proximity of the Châteaubourgs was the obvious reason for the delightful location chosen, facing south over the Loire. For the next decade, the family would spend most of Easter to November in the countryside, heavy with flowers and fruit, surrounded by lush fields and groves. Tempting valleys cut the slopes; smiling paths ran sheltered by tall beeches, severe poplars, and gnarled oaks; old farmhouses nestled in the folds of the land. The very name sang magic—the place Jules liked best in the world. Chantenay marked the boy forever:

From my tiny bedroom, I could see the river unwinding for two or three leagues, through the meadows it flooded every winter. In the summer . . . strips of fine yellow sand emerged, a whole archipelago of shifting islands! Ships could hardly thread their way through the narrow passes . . . The need to sail would not leave me (MCY).

Every detail of the house would imprint itself in Jules's mind. On arrival from the church square, a large brown double gate gave access through the gravel yard to a century-old detached residence. Along the façade ran flowerbeds and hydrangea, laurel, and prickwood bushes, with a large fig tree on the left. Although the yard lacked grandeur, the shade of the two lime trees on the right felt welcoming in the summer heat.<sup>20</sup>

A red-tiled vestibule, with four little sideboards in the corners, led

through a large glass door and down to the garden via a double perron. On the far left was the parents' room, lit from both sides and with a full-sized bathroom with its own steps. Next came the dining room, with a large hearth, where the family spent most of the time, the living room, and two bedrooms—the (male and female) servants were consigned to the attics. In the basement, with direct access to the garden, were the pantry, kitchen, linen room, wood store, huge billiards room, fruit store, and cellars running far under the yard.

The family used the upper story of a wing to the left of the yard, but let the lower one to their former maid. Now called Mme Mathurine Pâris, she ran the pork butcher's shop looking conveniently out onto the church square.

One of Jules's bedroom windows overlooked the side lane, and he had his own corridor leading into the courtyard. His other window opened on a magnificent panorama above the small fruit tree: the entrance to the port, where "the yellowish Loire majestically broadened," Mabon Island School for Cabin-Boys, the wooded slopes of Bouguenais, the monastery of Les Couëts, and the sunken pastures of "the island-village of Trentemoult, whose inhabitants . . . marry only among themselves" (*BB* iv). The ever-present Loire provided a moving tapestry of barges, yachts, and clippers.

Below stretched two terraced gardens. Bunches of grapes wound graciously down the balustrades of the steps, and begonias and wisteria ran under the windows and up the wall, with tendrils dropping down to the billiards and linen rooms. In front of the perron hung baskets of zinnias, petunias, and geraniums.

Through the top garden, laid out in English style, ran a broad straight path where the family liked to sit after meals, bordered by newly-planted magnolias. An avenue of mature lime trees, severely pollarded, ran along the terraced wall overlooking the bottom garden, culminating in a bower that formed a perfect trysting-place, with its complete privacy and intimacy.

Jules would run down another stone perron to the lower garden, laid out in geometrical French style as eight fruit and vegetable

squares. Along the south-facing terrace wall grew strawberry bushes and peach, plum, apricot, cherry, pear, and apple trees, producing almost too much fruit; at the bottom of the garden ran another avenue of cut lime trees. The environment was perfect for two growing boys, healthy in the sun and fresh air and able to make as much noise as they wanted while being discreetly watched over.

Pierre's attitude mixed affection and severity, loving epithets of "*choux*" (darlings) and "You're late!" his telescope fixed on the clock of Les Couëts. The boys came home from school to questions about their marks, with much witty repartee, sometimes a little scathing.

Family fun and games centered on Jules. The boys had long billiards sessions; in the evening the family would read out loud or play snakes and ladders (ADF 21). If the stars come out, Jules and Paul would ask Pierre to show them faraway worlds with telescopes, which they imagined they were going to inhabit, at least according to Ducrest (RD 29). Pierre's explanations judiciously mixed references to the Creator of All Things and the Greek myths.

Sunday church was obligatory, as the priest was a good friend of Pierre's. But as compensation, local merchants set up in front of the church to sell Jules and Paul barley-sugar pipes and other local candies (RD 73).

The inseparable brothers would occasionally come back from school on foot, under the limes and beeches of the brothel-laden Quai de la Fosse. The unloading of boats fascinated them, and they would chat with the sailors, building up a library of memories (RD 27–28).

Usually, though, they took a horse-drawn omnibus, sharing the two rows of seats with all walks of life. Nicknamed White Ladies after a Walter Scott heroine, their bodywork, four horses, and drivers' uniforms shone white. A hidden music box driven by the wheels endlessly played music by François Boieldieu, with no on-off switch. Leaving from Place de la Bourse, around the corner from Uncle Châteaubourg's, Jules and Paul would get off at the Warehouse stop, threading their way through the kegs of rum, bales of coffee, sacks for the Rice Mill, and sticky rubber-tree-leaf gunny bags for the molasses

refinery. Their path led above the quarries of Les Salorges, teeming with the descendants of the Nantes Revolutionaries who had drowned hundreds of opponents in 1793: “They coupled only among themselves and feared neither man nor God, spawning a degenerate race of terrifying appearance” (ADF 27). Stories circulated that they were not really human, making the boys rush past (RD 20).

The Towpath led Jules and Paul past the Pannetons’, with huge exotic cedars, and the Chéguillaumes’, with a pretty daughter called Ninette. Other neighbors the family would visit included old Desgraviers, who knew conjuring tricks. Armand Desgraviers was, in Jules’s sarcastic words, a “genius who doesn’t know it” (June 15, 1856); but there was another attractive girl, Angèle, two years older than Jules. The Langlois also had children of the same age, though the father seemed rather intimidating, fitting his building of the forges of Basse-Indre, two miles downstream.

In the middle of the bucolic groves and idyllic orchards clanked and roared the government machine factory at Indret. Despite the terrifying cacophony, oil, and dirt, something in the equipment fascinated Jules. Every so often he made a special trip to see how work on the ships was progressing (*Int.* 88). People even talked of building a *Leviathan*, a ninety-cannon warship. How could a machine work on its own? All those pistons and levers moved with worrying but exhilarating regularity. Jules never liked the precision stuff, the dry paper-bound intellectualizing. But he loved the power and movement, the simulacrum of life—with, lurking underneath, a fear that autonomous, animate machines were dangerously trespassing on the divine.

Uncle and Aunt Châteaubourg lived close by the Vernes, with a huge estate for the children to play in. Often cousins Caroline, Marie, and Hilaire would come out to Chantenay for parties and excursions. Jules’s favorite walk followed the river banks, through the blossoming meadows to the pastures of Roche-Maurice, a mile downstream, or La Musse and the valleys of Saint-Herblain. Sometimes they even did the five miles to the Couëron ferry, admiring the magnificent view from the slopes opposite Indret (*BB* iv), and hence ending up at Uncle

Prudent's. The Tronsons would also often visit Chantenay for the evening, for "music, parlor games, rhyming couplets, charades, and impromptu verse" (RD 29). Occasionally the Vernes made the trip to the Tronsons' own country house on the River Sèvre (RD 21).

Jules always regretted leaving the Eden-like countryside. Each September, the dreaded moment when he would swap paradise for school drudgery loomed closer and closer. But even back in grimy Nantes, the excitement continued, because of the "pyroscaphs," long-funneled passenger paddle-steamers heading up and down the Loire. Downtown was an active seaport: tall ships brought whiffs of Canton, Batavia, or the South Seas into Jules's bedroom.

As if to emulate the Cape Horners and whalers, the two brothers taught themselves to sail. "Sometimes I was captain, sometimes . . . Paul. But Paul was the better" (*Int.* 87):

At the end of Quai de la Fosse stood a boat-hire at a franc a day. It seemed a lot to us, risky too, for the boats . . . leaked everywhere. First we hired a one-master, but the second had two, and the third three, just like the real coastal luggers (MCY).

Cooper had instilled only the theory of tacking, luffing, and sailing close to the wind:

The atrocious helm changes . . . the shame of veering into the wind when the swell ruffled the broad Loire basin between Trentemoult and our Chantenay! . . . We would leave with the ebb and head downwind, which helped us come back on the flood-tide . . . Our crude, disgraceful vessel sailed past Haute-Indre, then between the charming shores of Basse-Indre and Indret. And struggling from bank to bank, what lustful looks we would cast on the pretty yachts skipping over the water! (MCY).

Jules and Paul went as far afield as the Erdre and Sèvre, north and south of Nantes. If you knew what you were doing, you could sail all

the way to the Tronsons', though you had to be a dab hand to get around the corner of Jean Bart without getting out and pulling.

Their home stretch hummed with sights and sounds:

On the fine meadows, submerged and fertilized each year, horses grazed freely after the haymaking and the wandering cattle produced long lowing sounds . . . The echo brought in a cacophony: the sea salts coarsely calling between the ships, the regular chants of the mariners hoisting heavy burdens, the boatmen lewdly catcalling over or striking up in unison the bawdy shanties of "The Couëron Sailor."

From every angle loomed up verdant isles, dappled with flocks of aquatic birds and dotted with ruminants reclining under the willows.<sup>21</sup>

With her dead nephews gazing naively out at her, Sophie lay in bed and worried herself sick about the boys' escapades.<sup>22</sup>

By October 3, 1837, the first day of term, Jules and Paul had become boarders at St. Stanislas School.<sup>23</sup> From fifth grade in this junior boys' school, or rather seminary, Jules's future was mapped out: after seventh or eighth grade, he would proceed to St. Donatien Junior Seminary. Designed mostly for priests, taught by priests, fewer than half of St. Stanislas's 122 inmates were Nantais, some hailing from the French Caribbean or New Orleans, born Frenchmen but now Americans. The pupils from the diaspora surely told exotic tales of their homelands.

The view was fantastic. On a hill outside Nantes, with gardens down to the Erdre and vineyards all around, the Louis XV mansion faced south. It had two tacked-on wings, a three-story arcaded building running westward, and a square tower at the southern tip.<sup>24</sup>

Lay headmaster Pierre Litoust had lost his position as judge for refusing to swear loyalty to Louis-Philippe's progressive government. With an open and cheerful, almost family-like atmosphere, standards were reputedly good.<sup>25</sup>

There were two terms, with prize days in May and late August. Each year, especially at the beginning, Jules won a few second-rank prizes in singing, geography, Greek, or Latin, making him a goodish student, while Paul got prizes in spelling and grammar.<sup>26</sup> In any case Jules disapproved of working too hard: “hard-working students invariably become blockheads as adolescents and fools as adults” (March 14, 1853).

A schoolmate retained vivid memories of: “a bubbling schoolboy, out of breath as he sprinted with his hoop across the broad terrace . . . a dissipated youngster, showing more enthusiasm for play than work; but under this exuberance witty repartees already germinated. You knew that this green fruit, scarcely budded from its flower, would later ripen” (*JVEST* 64).

Did St. Stanislas leave any trace? The traditional education left little room for science or math; the Greek made virtually no mark on Jules, apart from an interest in mythology. Although never mastering Latin, he retained ever after a conviction of its usefulness and a predilection for obscene French-Latin puns. But his favorite subject was geography, and here a humble sixth prize would evolve into a guiding passion and world fame. Teachers should never despair, even if their charges seem to learn the wrong things.

About a year after his first nautical exploits, Jules luffed off alone in a one-master, although unable to swim properly (23 May 78 from Hetzel). Sailing into the wind, he got into difficulty near Binet Island or Binet Mound (see Figure 3):

Five miles down from Chantenay, a plank broke and the water poured in . . . The skiff sank like a stone, so I . . . threw myself onto an islet with dense reeds and tall waving plumes.

. . . I was Daniel Defoe’s hero. Already I planned to make a wattle hut, a hooked line from reed and thorns, a fire by rubbing sticks, just like a savage. I wouldn’t make signals, as . . .

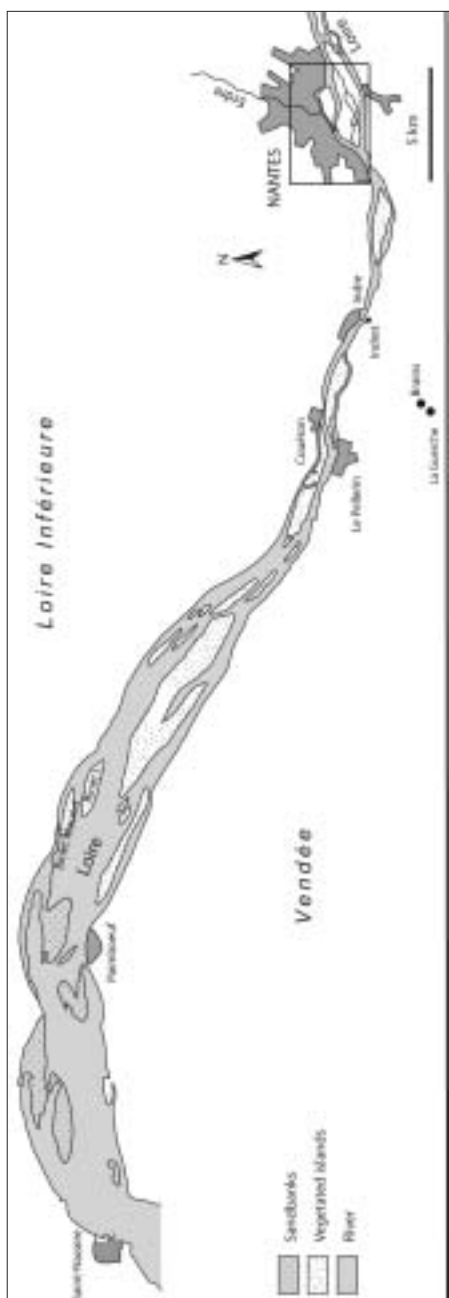


Figure 3: The Loire downstream from Nantes

I'd be saved too soon! . . . In the end, I knew solitary need and suffering on a desert island. My stomach cried out . . .

It only lasted a few hours and as soon as the tide went out, I just had to cross ankle-deep to . . . "the mainland" . . . And so I went calmly home and ate family dinner, rather than the Crusoe-esque one I had dreamed of: raw shellfish, a slice of peccary, and manioc-flour bread! (MCY).

Ignoring his cousins' death, taken over by Johann David Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Jules sought an idealized life as a castaway, but one already ironically passé. He precociously realized that even paradise was sullied with rainbows. Those born too late to pioneer desert islands could only self-consciously recreate the towering ancestors' adventures. The genre was already a bit frayed at the edges.

Biographer Marguerite Allotte de la Fuÿe famously claimed that, at either 11 or 13 to 14, Jules ran away to sea. In the great-niece-by-marriage's words, at six one summer morning

Jules slipped out of the house . . . and had still not come back by half past twelve! . . . Colonel de Goyon, living in the nearby château of L'Abbaye, galloped off to tell Pierre Verne. Suddenly a sailor from the Grenouillère crossing came to say that while at the L'Homme-qui-Porte-Trois-Malices Inn, run by Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, he had seen Monsieur Jules and two cabin boys in a small boat accosting the ocean-going *Coralie*. This three-master, belonging to shipowner Le Cour-Grand-maison, had that morning weighed anchor for the Indies, although due in at Paimboeuf that evening. Fortunately there was the pyroscaph! Reaching Paimboeuf by six, Pierre Verne collected his son, who had somehow embarked by buying out a cabin-boy's engagement, and had regretted it ever since Indret.

What hysterical desire to bring back a coral choker for capricious Caroline had suddenly taken hold of him?

Given a good talking to, thrashed, and reduced to bread and water, Jules had to vow to renounce imaginings of the Indies and limit his wanderings . . . “Henceforth I will travel only in dream,” he swore to his mother.<sup>27</sup>

The story seems too good to be true, especially as Cabidoulin is not an authentic surname. Nonetheless, many of the details do bear scrutiny. The three-master *Coralie*, owned by the firm of Le Cour Grand-Maison, has been confirmed. The epic horseman was Charles-Marie-Auguste de Goyon (1802–70), owner of a property 200 yards away and later general. The other two family biographers support much of the story, because . . . their relatives told them.<sup>28</sup> However, Ducrest considers many of the details inaccurate and states in particular that the adventure happened to Paul, not Jules. Also, the intention was to descend the Loire without going further than the inland hamlet of Paimboeuf.

The ultimate source for the anecdote may simply be an article still out there. One trustworthy witness who claimed to know Jules “very well” reported that his aim on this occasion was “to locate Captain Sambin and bring him back to his wife.”<sup>29</sup> According to another article, Verne told the author in 1861 that at the age of eleven he took a small boat and tried to catch up with the *Octavie*, en route for the Indies.<sup>30</sup> Yet another states that the events took place on July 15, 1839.<sup>31</sup>

Whether it was Jules or Paul, coral or the castaway, the East or West Indies or Paimboeuf, something must have happened. As deep as you dig into Jules’s psyche, you discover a yearning for escape and transcendence, sullied by a nagging doubt that reality may not live up to his imagination, a realization that “they” will follow you to the ends of the earth, that the whole world has been mapped out. His prepubescent dream, repeated over the next seventy years, of creating an unknown island paradise, of being a “king without subjects” (*Five Weeks i*), was precociously pregnant with world-weary wisdom.

