

## Chapter 1

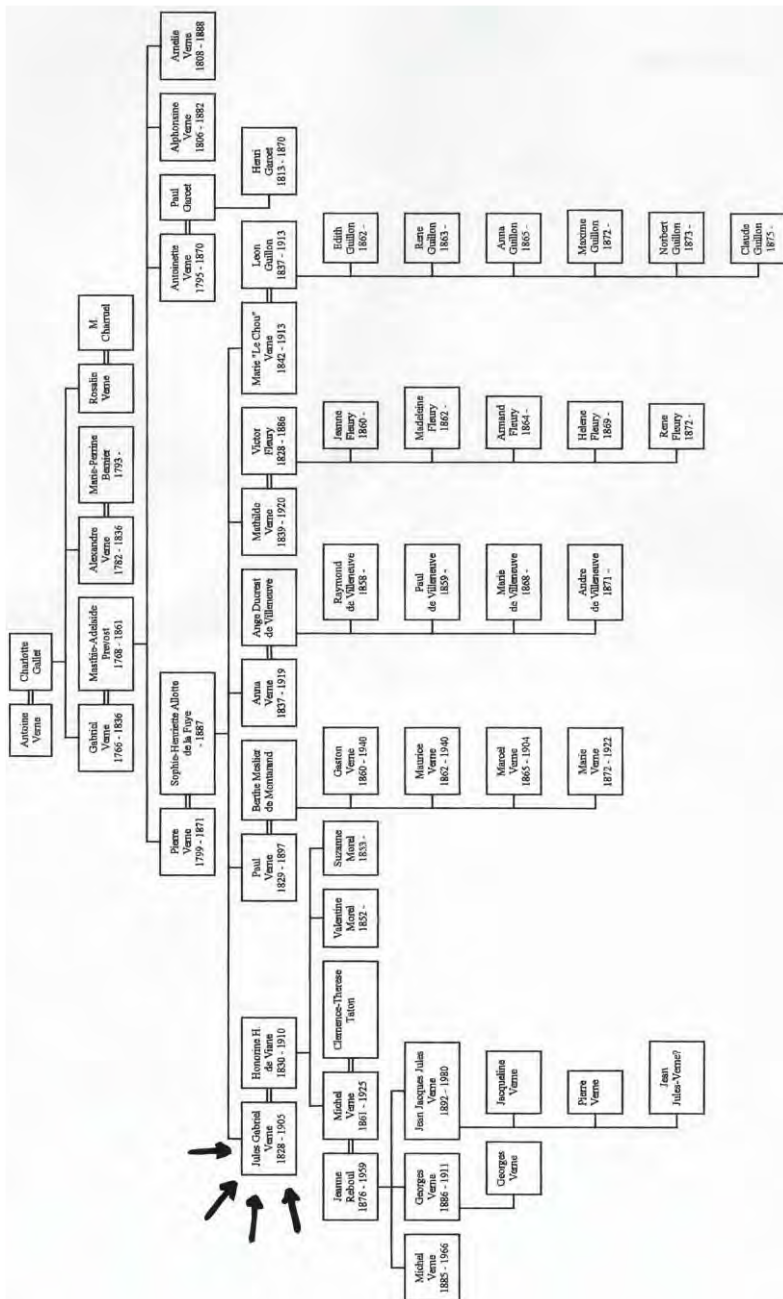
# Island Adrift: 1828–33



In 1826 France is a constitutional monarchy. After the Napoleonic escapades, economic stability and artistic creativity are helping the centre of the world to find her feet again.

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

It was this colourful setting, built on an activity already abhorrent to an enlightened few, that Jules Verne saw on first opening his eyes. He also breathed in an illustrious family heritage.



3. Verne's family tree

“Verne” means alder tree, as in the family coat of arms. The first recorded ancestor was one Vital Verne, a sixteenth-century cobbler in the Massif Central. His forebears may have been Italian or from Le Vernet, in Auvergne.<sup>14</sup> Starting with Vital’s son, the descendants invariably became lawyers, although another branch founded the famous Banque Vernes. After an eighteenth-century Antoine, senior legal adviser, came a Jean-Gabriel, seigneur of Cormantin and Uxelles, and his cousin Gabriel, magistrate in Provins, a small town south of Paris.



5. The Verne coat of arms

Gabriel’s fourth child, Pierre Verne, spent a few months as a barrister in Paris, then settled in Nantes in 1825 to join his long-established uncle. The following year, this self-proclaimed half-Parisian bought, on credit, into Jean-François Pâquetreau’s practice at 2 Quai Jean Bart.<sup>15</sup> Looking out onto Feydeau Island, the building stood on the corner where the Loire absorbed the Erdre, which François I called “the most beautiful river in France”.<sup>16</sup> Despite the legal virtual closed shop, Pierre aimed to build the best practice in Nantes. His background and literary taste helped, and he had the gravitas. He began to expand the client list into the lucrative marine business.

In an oil painting, M. Verne appears unexceptional beside a small roll-top desk, perfect order presiding over his paper cutter and blotter. Later photographs show 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 and thin lips.

<sup>14</sup> Régis de Véron de La Combe, “En Remontant la Loire”, *BSJV* 150:36–7.

<sup>15</sup> *JJV* 2. However, some sources say Paquetreau and place Pierre Verne’s office at 5 Quai Jean Bart.

<sup>16</sup> Reported on <http://www.nantesmetropole.fr/>.



#### 6. The Verne residence on Quai Jean Bart

Pierre's nephew described him as "intelligent, pleasant, and witty, a passionate music lover, the life and soul of our family get-togethers".<sup>17</sup> His 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".<sup>18</sup> He performed regularly in choirs and was liberal and open-minded in many ways; Jules dubbed him "a veritable saint".<sup>19</sup> But saints are difficult to live with. Pierre was also a strict Jansenist, a stickler for detail, and a puritan who despised the poets' lax lifestyles.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> JJV 2.

<sup>18</sup> JJV 2.

<sup>19</sup> In a letter of 4 November 1871 from Verne to his publisher.

<sup>20</sup> JJV 2-3.

According to the family tradition, one fine day in 1826 the lawyer was walking under the cropped and lopped elms of La Petite Hollande, the triangular garden at the sharp end of Feydeau. In front of him spread a sandy bathing beach, blue-sailed fishing boats, and the ocean-going port. But a slim, vivacious woman captured his attention instead, with green eyes, reddish-golden hair, and the demure look of the better classes (ADF 8).<sup>21</sup> (We are forced here to follow the often unreliable family biographer; information referenced “ADF” should be taken with a large pinch of salt.) After the vision had vanished, he learned that Sophie Allotte de la Fuÿe was 25 but still unmarried. The two were introduced and duly fell in love, the only surviving titbit being that Sophie joked she was good at making cakes and jam. Pierre asked for her hand in his best copperplate ([Oct. 56] – an abbreviated system of references is adopted here, consisting simply of the date of composition of letters<sup>22</sup>); and they married on 17 February 1827. Was it thought urgent? In any case, the wedding took place without most of Pierre’s family, five days away in Provins.<sup>23</sup>

Sophie, without profession, hailed from Morlaix and was gentle, gay, and super-imaginative. 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 Hongkonger, the hardliners using a mix of blood, language, and upbringing to exclude outlanders. Morlaix itself was synonymous with the tragic French-speaking Acadians, brutally sent “home” from newly British North America before being dispersed to Louisiana.

Sophie’s father ran the indirect taxation system in Nantes but had previously been manager of Huelgoat Forge; the family went back, via sundry military and naval commanders, to a Daniel Allotte, *Sieur de la Fuÿe*. Both families in fact overflowed with nobles, including Seigniors de Montbel, Chignet de Champrenard, de la Perrière, de la

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<sup>21</sup> Marguerite Pichelin (1874–1959) was the daughter-in-law of Maurice Allotte, Sophie’s nephew.

<sup>22</sup> References to letters quote either the exact date or the month and year (here: October 1856), as given by Verne himself. Where dating is absent, [14 Aug. 50] will be used; the parts of the date in italics are interpolated. Up to chapter 10 all are from Verne to his parents unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>23</sup> ADF 9.

Dantèque, and du Sapt, as well as many humble *de's* that at least showed an aspiration towards nobility. Pierre was himself an *écuyer* (member of the gentry), his arms emblazoned on a seal passed down from time immemorial.<sup>24</sup> 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 and 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.



7. Verne's birth place on Rue de Clisson

One of her surviving letters 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 prosperous parents. Augustin (b. 1768) and Dame Sophie Allotte de la Fuyë (b. 1774) rented the third floor of 4 Rue de Clisson for F 200 a month (about £800 in modern-day values). With four main rooms plus a study and attic upstairs, the flat was finely furnished, boasting arched doors and elaborate

parquet.<sup>25</sup> On the walls hung stern portraits of Sophie's grandfathers, a Feydeau ship-owner and a mariner who had braved the Arctic.<sup>26</sup> 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 often away gambling and womanising. A few months later, he moved out for good.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> RD 2.

<sup>25</sup> ADF 10.

<sup>26</sup> ADF 11.

<sup>27</sup> Dekiss, *Jules Verne l'enchanteur*, 11.

No. 4 stood on the corner with Rue Kervégan, the broad avenue bisecting Feydeau, built and still dominated by the great slavers. It was not a natural island, and is no longer one, surrounded as it is by dual carriageways; but it was then *the* place to live, a boat-shaped haven at the heart of town. A charming gouache by JWM Turner, done in 1828, shows the classical terraces of Quai Duguay-Trouin, bonneted pumpkin hawkers, and junk-like boats nestling on a too-broad Loire. The island's chequered history showed in the visible subsidence and the street names: René Duguay-Trouin and Jean Bart were corsairs, Clisson an Anglo-French turncoat.

Jules-Gabriel was born at noon on 8 February 1828. It seems typical of Pierre that his son should emerge in the earliest month allowed by convention. Three hours later, the birth certificate was signed and sealed. Accompanying Pierre to the registry office was François Tronson (1787–1855), Sophie's brother-in-law and magistrate, neighbour, and family friend.<sup>28</sup> This was the family's first Julius/Jules (the names are the same in French), called after Caesar, a fourth-century Breton martyr, and a pope with three children. The boy was also named for grandfather Gabriel Verne or the Archangel of that name.

Although wet nurses were customary, the baby was probably breastfed by his mother.<sup>29</sup> Baptism seemed urgent, for more than a third of children were lost and Jules would have risked everlasting limbo without it. Indeed his probable cradle mate, Léontine, born to the Tronsons two months later, was to die the following year; her sister Céline had also been lost in 1823. Pierre had excellent church connections, and a quickie was done the following day with special permission from the bishop.

To calm the baby's crying, Pierre doubtless performed arias from contemporary operas.<sup>30</sup> Sophie sang lullabies, fed on demand, planted kisses, and often stayed up all night keeping watch.<sup>31</sup>

The official christening provides an opportunity to meet the relatives. So that Pierre's family can travel in better weather, it takes

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<sup>28</sup> As recorded in the birth certificate (CNM 265–6).

<sup>29</sup> Verne's 1842 poem to his mother (in CNM 24) implies both he and his sister were breastfed.

<sup>30</sup> Given that he did so for Jules's sister ([3 May 37] from Sophie to Pierre's mother, reproduced in *J.V.* (Amiens), 31 (1994):20–1.)

<sup>31</sup> At least according to Verne's 1842 poem.

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; also in attendance are Pierre's pretty sisters, Alphonsine and Amélie, barely out of their teens, but already interchangeably old-maidish.<sup>32</sup>

For the banquet, although really it should be the debauched Au-



8. *Nantes from Feydeau Island*  
(JWM Turner, 1828)

gustin, Dame Sophie's second brother presides at the top table. This bachelor and eccentric is Jules's great-uncle, but everyone calls him Uncle Prudent (1766–1860). A former ship-owner and buccaneer, he has retired to gentleman farming in the village of Brains, where he will shortly become mayor. Despite his advancing age, he often walks all the way to Nantes.<sup>33</sup>

During a lull, one of the Provins 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 slipping away, therefore, we should hear the good uncle out:

Before becoming ship-owners 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 neighbouring fields. Hence our name ... As for the name Allotte, it comes to us from a certain Allotted, a Scottish archer, who ...

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<sup>32</sup> ADF 10.

<sup>33</sup> ADF 10.



“Here he goes again”, interrupts Pierre. “Uncle Prudent’s going on about the legend of Louis XI’s archer and his Scottish domain”.<sup>34</sup>

On the face of it, the story of British ancestry may indeed seem mere hearsay, as the canny lawyer alleges. Before she died, however, Verne’s great-niece Marie-Thérèse de Lassée provided further tantalising snippets:

In 1462, N. Allott, a Scot who had come to France with Louis X’s Scottish Guard, rendered service to the king, who ennobled him and gave him the “droit de fuye”, the right to 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>35</sup>

The Scottish Archers of Louis XI (r. 1461–83) are well documented, the hundred members being from the best pedigrees. A *fuïe* (*fuye* in the Poitou region) does mean a small dovecote, usually on columns, in other words a *tourelle*. The name Allott is unknown in France, as is Allotte in Britain. Daniel Allotte’s grandson, Paul, lived in Martaizé, six miles south of Loudun.<sup>36</sup> The “Ancestors” file in the now-defunct Centre de Documentation Jules Verne in Amiens contained an anonymous family tree. Amazingly, it began “Allott, Sieur de la Fuÿe, 1440–1525” and “N. Allotte de la Fuÿe, 1480–1550”. Although it contained no further information and the dates are suspiciously well-rounded, they may have come from undivulged family documents. In sum, the Caledonian ancestry does seem plausible.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> ADF 11.

<sup>35</sup> “L’Origine des Allotte de la Fuÿe”, *BSJV* 11:55–6. The “droit de fuye” also involved jurisdiction over surrounding land, loosely the concept of a domain, including three levels of dispensation of justice, with the power to clap in irons (Roger de la Fuÿe (1890–1961), “Jules Verne inconnu, mon oncle”, *Connaissance du Monde*, no. 3, February 1959, 51–60). Prouteau (59) indicates the name as Baron “Norbert Allott”, but does not cite a source.

<sup>36</sup> Roger de la Fuÿe 51–60; with Vincent Buche (<http://www.rogerdelafuye.com/famille-roger-de-la-fuye.php3?action=lire&id=23>), he also affirms that N. Allott was “the head of Louis XI’s Scottish Guard”; that the Château de la Fuÿe was bought by Paul Allotte de La Fuÿe in about 1725 from the Bussy family, but then sold again by his son, Alexandre (b. 1726), in about 1761; and that it later served as a stable and cowshed.

<sup>37</sup> Additional, albeit allusive, support is given by Jules himself: “we must have an ancestor who got those rheumatisms from robbing in the woods and stopping stagecoaches on the main roads in the thirteenth century when British reiters roamed the countryside” [Mar.? 68].

Fortunately an unsuspected cornerstone survives. A building purporting to be the Château de la Fuÿe, the home of the Allotte de la Fuÿe family, is still standing, on the southwestern outskirts of Loudun. Curiously, no biographer has thought of looking it up in the phone book. The surprise on locating the building could not be greater than that of discovering Captain Nemo a pensioner in a seaside boarding house.



9. Château de la Fuÿe

In yellow freestone, with 600 feet of façade, castellations, moat, and drawbridge, the château, built in about 1465, boasts three internal towers for pigeons, plus two external *fuies*. The owner, M. Jacques Lallemand, asserts 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>38</sup>

The evidence, in sum, for the existence of one or two N. Allott(e)s, Scoto–French nobles, is strong. Even if we do not believe in “blood”, the Scottish ancestry apparently mixing in with the Breton surely conditioned the Allottes’ self-image. Given the love–hate relationship between the two nations, an Allotte could never be just another French citizen. Jules carried a weight of tradition on his infant shoulders.

Less than a year later, 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 cheek and jowl (JJV 2). What was more, the new dwelling stood across a narrow channel from Dame Sophie’s, meaning she could keep an eye on things. However, to drop in she had to make a wide detour.

As administrator of the Catholic charity that owned the building, François Tronson had no doubt arranged the rental—indeed, Pierre and Sophie had perhaps first come together through his good offic-

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<sup>38</sup> Sieur Allott was related to fishmonger Sir John Allot (c. 1548–91), famous Lord Mayor of London (1590–1); the family of the Franco–Scottish “Sir Allott” went back to 1390; the family acquired the title of Count before 1696 (Roger de la Fuÿe 51–60).

es. Sophie's brother-in-law was the son of another triangular captain, "punctual and methodical",<sup>39</sup> a convinced Legitimist (supporter of Charles X) who resigned his magistracy in protest at the 1830 Revolution. From 1819 to the mid-1820s, François and Louise Tronson had lived at 14 Rue Kervégan, 20 feet from Jules's birthplace.

As the ground floor flooded every few years, Quai Jean Bart had been turned into shops, rather lowering the tone (ADF 8). Above rose a mezzanine, two high-ceilinged storeys with six windows apiece, then mansarded maids' rooms. Colourful tapestries, tropical-



10. Paul Verne (1829-97)

wood furniture, and Chinese porcelain adorned the interior. The house was terraced in the Louis XVI style, corresponding to Georgian. Like Jules's birthplace, it had internal shutters and a fragile wrought-iron balcony at each window. And no. 2 again stood on a corner, but now with a commanding view of the Erdre, Feydeau, and the Loire.

Despite the four-storey grandeur, the Verne family apparently had only one of the thousand-square-foot middle floors, barely twice an Edinburgh living room. As if to compensate, the block appears in another

1828 gouache by Turner—and in the jazzed-up version, "Nantes from Feydeau Island" (1830). The original washed-out river scene has now been Italianately *remixé*, with blue-and-red awnings on the gondolas, curlicues on the mansions, and Mediterranean fishing smacks enticingly lined up before the Verne 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

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<sup>39</sup> RD 9.

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 millennia-old routes uncannily coincides with the family's taste for dominant views.

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

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 loggias.

By modern standards his early years were uncomfortable. The flat had a toilet with an evacuation tube but no flush mechanism or toilet-paper, and no bathroom or hot tap. In the kitchen, the only reliably warm area, with its vast cooking range 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, M. Pâris.<sup>40</sup> An affectionate pre-Proustian portrait, superstitious and humorously wary, may live on in the opening chapters of *Journey to the Centre 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*; peruse books, so long as she avoided atheists and free-thinkers; and dream of her boys' futures: inveterate womanisers like her father and uncle, desiccated lawyers like the rest of the family, or incurable romantics like herself?

Jules's first memory dated from 29–30 July 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<sup>41</sup>), he was surely echoing long-gone voices. His parents made it sound

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<sup>40</sup> ADF 100.

<sup>41</sup> We are obliged to accept the literal truth of Verne's "Memories of Childhood and Youth" and other autobiographical pieces even when his affirmations do not seem totally plausible.

as though the people were the troublemakers on the barricades in Place Graslin, where 16 men died.

With the living room taking up much of the flat, 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 a dog's leg and to the left a little of the Erdre and the houses on the far bank. He may also have had a window on the back courtyard, really just an airshaft, 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 espy the mascarons above each window on Feydeau, stonily pupil-less but winged to catch the sea breeze: turbaned faces transfixed by some unseen horror, angelic breeze-puffers, jovial mustachioed buccaneers, tender African visages—reflections of its dark and turbulent past.

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

The sombre *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 resorted to flags of convenience and brig conversions outside of French waters. As her stranglehold increased, the port armed hundreds of slave ships, with 1830 representing a peak. In 1835 more than 80 Nantes captains still continued the trade.

Jules's own family was involved. Family biographer Marguerite de la Fuÿe drops hints about the family's "muscadin" behaviour: fop-pish, Royalist, and tropically decadent. Pierre had arrived through his uncle Alexandre Verne (1782–1836), who had married into the

Bernier family, active in the slave trade.<sup>42</sup> Alexandre, a sometime naval quartermaster, was a civil servant as well as some sort of businessman; Eugène (b. 1792) and his half-brother Gustave Allotte (b. 1801/2), Sophie's cousins a hundred yards up the Erdre, were ship-owners, like most of the family friends and Dame Sophie's maternal grandfather.<sup>43</sup> Her paternal grandfather was a close associate of François Guillet de la Brosse, militia chief in the colony of Santo Domingo (Haiti). The Allottes were distantly related to René-Auguste Chateaubriand, father of the writer and career captain of pirate slaving ships, crewed from Nantes. Uncle Prudent's savings, some of which would be bequeathed to Jules, surely came from buccaneering and triangular trading.<sup>44</sup> Verne's coeval and biographer, Raymond Ducrest de Villeneuve (1859–1930), above all, openly admits to the Allottes' trade in "black gold", meaning rich slave trading.<sup>45</sup>

The real money in town came from that line of work, and a whole web of cross-links entangles Verne's extended family into the nexus of Feydeau Island, noble descent, reactionary politics, fervent Catholicism, ship-owning, maritime law, plantation management, and tropical commerce.<sup>46</sup> Some of the kindly relatives bouncing the infant on their knees had to have hundreds of deaths and thousands of ruined lives on their consciences.

Sophie worried about the damp. At the first spring sun, she would walk her boy under the mature magnolias of the Quai de la Fosse, which manages to look positively Neapolitan in Turner's 1828 oil. Jules's distant-relative biographer throws in that the trees were "planted by the ship-owners of Santo Domingo in memory of their houses, wrecked by the blacks".<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> JJV 2.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Taussat, "Rêverie sur un vieil almanach", *BSJV* 16:160–3.

<sup>44</sup> Given his work as a Nantes sea captain to South America at a period when nearly all the transatlantic trade involved commerce in slaves.

<sup>45</sup> RD 12.

<sup>46</sup> In 1821 53 out of the 67 Nantes ship-owning companies had links with the slave trade. Until the 1850s the majority of the city's notables were either slavers themselves or had close links with the trade.

<sup>47</sup> ADF 14.

The quayside promenade had walls higher than Jules's head, with tempting 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 at a franc a day. True, the boats had water sloshing around, but one of them, he noticed, had three masts, just like the real luggers (MCY). Jules was already a keen boat-spotter,



11. Pierre Verne (1799–1887), Musée Jules Verne, Nantes (François de la Celle de Châteaubourg)

able to tell a gunwale from a poop, a schooner from a man-of-war.

Beside the Stock Exchange, within spitting distance of the prow 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.<sup>48</sup> On summer nights gibberings and screeches echoed through the Verne flat. A few houses along was a bookshop—publisher specialising in local history.

If they ever tired of watching the rivers' forced couplings, Jules and Paul could play hide-and-seek in Dame Sophie's attic, among their great-grandfather's telescopes, sextants, and dusty

correspondence. 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 bridge to swivel left and pan out for a stunning Goya-like gouache of a muddy humpback thick with quarrelling fishwives. If Jules found it too noisy, he could head past the crawling shellfish,

<sup>48</sup> ADF 14.

cod, and tuna of the Fish Market on Feydeau's round rump, yet 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 at the water's edge, catcalling passers-by. But at least he could pretend to be studying the fish-shop-cum-swimming-establishment moored alongside, also sketched by the busy artist.

Along the shore docked tiny smacks from Atlantic port Le Croisic, selling produce 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 60 years later, he still yearned for the river scene and the forbidden sensual escape it proposed:

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. Quayside-bound, how I longed to cross the trembling gangplanks and tread their decks! (MCY).

The boy's surroundings showed surprising reversals. The rivers below the windows regularly flowed upstream, choosing different moments to do so. Sometimes the quays would flood, with horse-drawn buggies and household punts defying 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 blurred amongst all the upheavals and inversions. The Indies, not too far downstream, belonged to both America and Asia. "The Isles" lay both east and west, in both river and ocean. If terra firma could mysteriously yield underfoot, 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 one day the Erdre 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, upstream and down, the quick and the dead melded in his mind. All his life he would suffer from left-right and east-west disorder, category confusion, and pansexuality.



The family still worshipped at Holy Cross, trying to steer Jules away from his sweet and toy shop, Au Rat Goutteux (The Gouty Rat).<sup>49</sup> Although Pierre would read Fenimore Cooper to Jules,<sup>50</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 home-grown Gros-Plant wine, including lawyer turned priest Monsignor Auguste Alloue, aristocratic ship-owner (William-)Henri Arnous-Rivière, ever-polite ship-owner Gustave-Henri Bourcard, and army paymaster-general and relative of Chateaubriand Jean-Baptiste Coquebert—arch-conservative members of the establishment one and all. Table talk would include Charles X's dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies, his 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 the death of Walter Scott and the plans for street lighting in Nantes.

François Tronson, Charles Musseau, Alfred Guillon, and Pierre Verne recited their own poetry, sang their songs, performed their playlets, and played literary guessing games.<sup>51</sup> Pierre's compositions contained emphatic religious messages and witty allusions to those present.

At 8 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 50 yards from Quai Brancas, Jules often visited his childless uncle and aunt, François and Caroline de la Celle de Châteaubourg. An accomplished miniaturist, tobacco warehouse owner, and former army captain, Uncle Châteaubourg bore the title of Chevalier (knight). He was not only the son of Charles-Joseph de la Celle de Châteaubourg, living in Place Graslin and miniaturist to Napoleon and Joséphine, but also the brother-in-law of Bénigne de Chateaubriand, the writer's sister.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Luce Courville, "Jules Verne, La Famille Raton et le 'Rat-Goutteux' de Nantes", in *Jules Verne: Histoires inattendues* (Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978), 439–42.

<sup>50</sup> Jean Chesneaux, *Jules Verne: Un Regard sur le monde* (Bayard, 2001), 166.

<sup>51</sup> Yves Guillon, "Jules Verne et sa famille", *Bulletin de la Société archéologique d'Ille-et-Vilaine*, vol. 78 (1974), 121–38.

<sup>52</sup> De Lassée 56, Dumas 34.



6. Uncle Châteaubourg's on Rue Jean-Jacques



5. François de la Celle de Chateaubourg  
(1789–1879)

Uncle Châteaubourg would tell Jules heroic stories of the New World, of his great-uncle by marriage'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.<sup>53</sup> (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 fervour led him to self-mortification: to reinforce his wavering faith he would fast or physically punish himself. This flagellation, recorded by Jules's grandson, was applied with a scourge.<sup>54</sup> To ensure that the thongs did the necessary damage required deft wrist-action.

Did the boy wander in one day, following muffled groans and moans, to find his father *in flagrante delicto*? Did Mathurine the maid venture to show him lines of blood and pus on crumpled hair shirts? Jules could have no understanding of the sins Pierre punished himself for, but the self-inflicted tortures may have marked him deeply.

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<sup>53</sup> ADF 15.

<sup>54</sup> JJV states that "according to my father he practised self-flagellation", additional evidence being Pierre's surviving notes praising the role of "material and corporal penance" (2—although the word "corporal" is missing from the first edition of the biography in French (1973)).

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 pain inflicted on his son may have created doubts about its justice. Even a small boy could wonder whether the brilliant but twisted psyche constituted a fair judge and jury. The paternal violence may have led to the timidity that blighted much of Jules's life.

12. Verne's first school, on Place du Bouffay

