

1

Inauguration

The sun was about to sink below the line where sea and sky met, four or five leagues to the west.¹ The weather was fine. To the east, a scattering of small clouds absorbed the last rays, that would soon fade in the long high-latitude twilight, fifty-five degrees south of the equator.

The solar disc was only half-visible when a cannon sounded aboard the *Santa Fe*.² The flag of the Argentine Republic unfurled in the wind and rose to the head of the sloop's mainmast.

At the same instant a bright light broke from the lighthouse, a gunshot distance behind the narrows of Elgor Bay,³ where the *Santa Fe* lay at anchor. Two of the lighthouse keepers, together with the workmen on the beach and the crew assembled on the foredeck, greeted with long cheers the first light to shine out from this remote coast.

1. to the west. A note in the margin of the manuscript, following Verne's habit of checking the chronology by marking the dates, reads: "9 Dec. 1859," with "18 April" in faint pencil above.

2. *Santa Fe*. Literally "Holy Faith," often associated with Catholic proselytizing. As Vairo points out, the ship (which Verne writes "*Santa Fé*") is probably named for the city of Santa Fe in Argentina, since the real-life vessel involved in the building of the 1884 lighthouse was the *Paraná*, and Paraná and Santa Fe are only ten miles apart. MS: "~~*Santa Cruz*~~ *Santa Fe*." The *Santa Cruz* (Holy Cross) was one of Lasserre's cutters on his 1881 expedition, named after her home port in Argentina, confirming Vairo's view that one source for Verne was the 1884 lighthouse. In contrast with Verne's single vessel, seven ships sailed to Staten Island to build the real-life lighthouse, as well as a prison, telegraph office, and subprefecture (although the latter was transferred to Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego the same year).

3. Elgor Bay. Verne probably invented the name "baie d'El Gor," or rather borrowed it from his *Clovis Dardentor* (1896), where El Gor is a village in Algeria. Miller's map erroneously places Elgor Bay on the south coast. Vairo mistakenly locates it in Port San Juan (de Salvamento), between Cape San Juan and what was later called Punta Lasserre, on the north coast of the island, the site of the 1884 one, strangely at the end of the bay. Verne does say that Elgor Bay is "about three miles long," which corresponds only to Port San Juan, and similarly places it three miles inland, but he also states that it is "on the east coast" (ch. 1), necessarily between Diegos and Several Points. Despite his mistaken identification, Vairo (xiv) comments favorably on the accuracy of Verne's information about the only port after the Strait of Magellan, one frequently used by the French navigators and marked on charts as a place for repairs, with abundant water, wood, fresh meat, and wild celery to fight scurvy.

Pétel's map correctly locates Elgor Bay near modern Ferreyra Bay, just south of the northeastern tip.

Two more cannon shots answered, their detonations reproduced several times by the loud echoes. The sloop struck her colors in accordance with the rules governing warships. And Staten Island,⁴ where the waters of the Atlantic meet the Pacific, fell silent once more.

The workmen quickly boarded the *Santa Fe*, where they would spend this final night, leaving the two keepers alone on shore, for the third remained aloft at his post.

They did not go back to their lodgings, but chatted while strolling along the bay.

“Well, Vasquez!” said the younger one. “Tomorrow the sloop’s setting off -“

“Yes, Felipe, I hope her voyage home goes smoothly.”

“It’s a long way.”

“No longer than getting here.”

“You don’t say,” Felipe shot back, amused at his comrade’s answer.

“Well, my lad,” said Vasquez, “sometimes it *does* take longer to get there than to come home. Unless the wind helps you along, that is. Fifteen hundred miles is nothing with a good engine and a good wind.”

“And Captain Lafayate⁵ knows the way like the back of his hand.”

“And a direct route it is, lad. He sailed south to come here, and he’ll sail north to get back. And if that wind keeps seaward, he’ll have the coast for shelter. He might as well be sailing a river, like the Rio de la Plata.”

“But a river with only one bank.”

“Who cares, as long as you’ve got a good wind? And it’s a good one when it’s behind you!”

Vasquez was obviously enjoying the cheerful repartee with his colleague, who now came back with “Right! But what if the wind turns around?”

“That, Felipe, would be bad luck, which is one thing I hope the *Santa Fe* won’t have. She could do her 1,500 miles and be anchored in Buenos Aires in a fortnight. Now if the wind veered westerly -“

“There’d be no port to shelter in. Neither on land nor on water.”

“As you say, lad. There’s not a port in the whole of Tierra del Fuego or Patagonia.⁶ Not one. So if they don’t want to hit dry land, they’d better hit the high seas!”

4. Staten Island. Jack London has a striking passage about an approach to Staten Island in *Mutiny of the Elsinore* (1914, xxxii): “All of the land that was to be seen was snow. Long, low chains of peaks, snow-covered, arose out of the ocean. As we drew closer, there were no signs of life. It was a sheer, savage, bleak, forsaken land, a wild bight, between two black and precipitous walls of rock where even the snow could find no lodgment. I saw the four masts of a great ship sticking out of the water.”

5. Captain Lafayate. The fleet to build the 1884 lighthouse was under a Colonel Augusto Lasserre.

“But actually, Vasquez, the weather looks as though it’ll hold.”

“I think so, Felipe. We’re coming into the fine season. Three great months - that’s really something.”

“They finished work at just the right time.”

“I know, lad, I know. Early December here is what northern sailors would call early June. Of course there’s the squalls that’ll think nothing of sinking a ship as easy as whipping your sou’wester off. But they don’t happen all that often. And once the *Santa Fe*’s in port, the storms can rage as much as the devil wants! No fear, our island’s not going to topple into the deep, lighthouse and all!”

“Hopefully, Vasquez. Anyway, when they bring news from home and come back with the relief team -“

“In three months, Felipe.”

“Yes - three months! But this island won’t go anywhere in that time.”

“Nor will we,” replied Vasquez, rubbing his hands. He had just taken a long puff of his pipe and thick smoke surrounded him. “See here, lad, this isn’t like being aboard some boat, rocked back and forth by the storm. Or say this *is* a boat, moored to the tail of America, and she’s not going to drag anchor! Not that these aren’t rough waters. It’s only fair to say the Cape Horn seas are ill-famed.⁷ Why, a man couldn’t even count the number of wrecks on these coasts!⁸ A looter couldn’t find a better place to make his fortune. But that’s all going to change, Felipe. Staten Island has a lighthouse now. All the hurricanes from every corner of the horizon couldn’t blow it

6. Patagonia. Magellan invented this name “because the inhabitants, called Patagonians, that is ‘men with big feet,’ had long shoes made from guanaco skin” (*Magellania* iii). On 3 December 1887, while discussing the possibility of a map for *Two Years’ Holiday*, Verne wrote to his publisher “Patagonia, as I told you, exists only on French maps. On the present map [in Spanish] and on the Yankee maps, Chile and the Argentine Confederation consider themselves to be at home as far as Cape Horn.” If the term may formerly have had validity in all languages - it is used, for example, by Poe in *Arthur Gordon Pym* (xvi) – since about 1900 it was much less used because Patagonia had been split between Chile and Argentina.

In Verne’s *Captain Grant’s Children: Journey Around the World* (1867), the brilliant but absent-minded French geographer Paganel cites “one of his compatriots who formerly occupied the throne of Araucania . . . the good M. De Tonneins [*sic*]” (I xi). Former lawyer Orelie de Touneins was famously elected King of Araucania and Patagonia in 1860, but ousted by Chile in 1862, and subsequently mounted three expeditions to rally the Indians against the foreign invaders.

7. the Cape Horn seas have become ill-famed. “that famous Cape Horn which, better than its brother the Cape of Good Hope, would have deserved the name of Cape of Tempests!” (*Grant* I ix).

8. the number of wrecks on these coasts! Nearly one wreck a month was estimated to happen, or eight to nine hundred over the nineteenth century.

out; ships'll see it and they'll have time to change course, with the beacon to guide them. No danger of running onto those rocks at Cape Tucuman or Several Point.⁹ Not even when you can't see your hand in front of your face. We're the ones to keep the lantern shining, and we'll do it properly!"

Vasquez's tone of conviction touched Felipe. Perhaps the latter did not feel quite as lighthearted about the long weeks he would be spending on this deserted island, cut off from humanity until the trio were relieved. But this aspect did not seem to bother Vasquez, for he concluded:

"See here, lad. I've spent these forty years sailing every sea in the Old World and New. I've been cabin boy, midshipman, sailor, and officer. Well now that I'm getting on, I couldn't hope for better than keeping a lighthouse. And not just any - the Lighthouse at the End of the World!"

And at the tip of this forsaken island, at the limit of inhabited and inhabitable lands, the name was apt.

"Say, Felipe," added Vasquez. His pipe had gone out and he was tapping it on his hand. "When d'you relieve Moriz?"

"At ten. Until two in the morning."

"Good. After that it's me on until first light."

"So the most sensible thing is for both of us to get some sleep!"

"To bed, then, Felipe. To bed!"

Vasquez and Felipe went up to the little perimeter around the lighthouse, and into the living quarters. The door closed behind them.

They spent a peaceful night. Vasquez concluded it by putting out the light, which had been burning for twelve hours.

The tide is not usually strong in the vast Pacific, especially along the American and Asian coasts. But Atlantic tides are vigorous, and their force is felt even on the most distant shores of the Magallanes.¹⁰

The sea began going out at six in the morning.¹¹ If the sloop had wanted to take advantage of, she would have needed to sail at daybreak. But she was not quite ready, and so the captain planned to leave Elgor Bay on the evening tide.

The *Santa Fe*, of the Argentine Navy, was of 200 tons' burden and 160 horsepower. Her captain and first officer headed a crew of about fifty men, including the petty officers. She had been assigned to coastal patrol from the mouth of the Rio de la Plata to Le Maire Strait¹² on the Atlantic Ocean.

9. Cape Tucuman or Several Point. Verne refers to "cap Tucuman" and "pointe Several," both unattested the latter is now known as Fallows Point.

10. the Magallanes. Verne's "Magéllanie" is normally "(the) Magallanes" in English, the term that will be used here; "Magellania" was unattested until *Magellania* (2002), the English translation of *En Magéllanie*.

11. the morning. MS reads "11 October" in the margin.

12. Le Maire Strait. Named by James Le Maire (c. 1565-1616), Dutch navigator.

Marine engineering had not yet designed cruisers, torpedo-boats, and other fast ships, and the *Santa Fe*'s propeller gave her a speed of only nine knots. But that would do for policing the coasts of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, frequented only by fishing boats.

That year,¹³ the government of Argentina was building a lighthouse on Staten Island, at the mouth of Le Maire Strait, and had detailed the *Santa Fe* to transporting the men and equipment for construction. They had followed the plans of a skilled Buenos Aires engineer and the lighthouse was now finished.

The *Santa Fe* had been moored at the end of Elgor Bay for about three weeks. After unloading four months of provisions, and so ensuring the new lighthouse keepers would have plenty of supplies until the relief came, Captain Lafayate would take the construction workmen back on board. Had there not been an unexpected delay in completing the work, the *Santa Fe* would have returned to her home port a month earlier.

Captain Lafayate had no reason to worry. His anchorage at the end of the bay was sheltered from northerlies, southerlies, and westerlies. Only bad weather from the open sea could have caused him problems, but at the beginning of summer he was hopeful that the Magellanic waters would see merely brief disturbances.

It was seven o'clock when the captain and First Officer Riegal left their cabins in the wings of the poop, at the aft end of the ship. The sailors had almost finished scrubbing the deck, and were pushing the last of the water down through the scupper. The sloop would not be sailing until afternoon, but the chief petty officer was already making preparations as he saw to the removal of the sail-covers, the polishing of the brasswork around the air shafts, binnacles, and deck lights, and the securing of the longboat, leaving the smaller one available for use. At sunrise the colors were hoisted on the brigantine. Three-quarters of an hour later, four bells sounded for'ard, and the sailors proceeded to their duties.

After a shared breakfast, the two officers returned to the poop to observe the atmospheric conditions, which were fairly good, since the wind was landward. Then they instructed the petty officer to set them ashore.

The captain's agenda that morning was to make one final inspection of the lighthouse and its annexes - the keepers' quarters and the storerooms containing the provisions and fuel - ascertaining that all was in order. Accordingly he and the first officer went ashore. As they made their way to the lighthouse perimeter, they spoke of the three men who would remain in the sad solitude of Staten Island.

"This is a hard assignment," said the captain. "Operating a lighthouse is not easy work, even when in daily contact with the land, not the case here.

13. That year. 1859, as revealed in ch. 2.

Of course we have to remember these are good men, used to a tough life. Two of them are former sailors.”

“Absolutely,” replied Riegal. “But it’s one thing to be a lighthouse keeper on a busy coast, and quite another to live on a deserted island where ships never put in. The only reason they sight this island is to give it the widest possible berth.”

“Admittedly, Riegal. That’s why we’ll relieve Vasquez, Felipe, and Moriz in three months. And this is the best season for them to start such an assignment.”

“Yes, sir. They’ll be spared those terrible Cape Horn winters.”

“Terrible, yes. When we did a little reconnaissance in the strait a few years ago, from Tierra del Fuego to Tierra de la Desolacion, between Cape Virgins and Cape Pilar,¹⁴ I got to know those tempests by heart. But after all, the keepers do have a solid house, and no storm is going to blow it down. They’ll have plenty of food and coal even if their term of duty over-runs by two months. We’re leaving them in good health, and they’ll be in good health when we see them again. Even if the air seems cold, at least it’s clean at this entrance to the Atlantic and the Pacific! And there’s something else, Riegal: when the Maritime Authority asked for men to run the Lighthouse at the End of the World, the only problem was how to choose.”

The two officers had just reached the perimeter, where Vasquez and his colleagues were waiting for them. The gate opened for them and they paused, returning the trio’s salutes.

Captain Lafayette studied the three men, from their feet in heavy sea boots to their waxed hoods, and then he spoke.

“Was everything in order last night?”

“Everything, captain,” replied Vasquez.

“No ships sighted to sea?”

“None, sir.”

“Nor in Le Maire Strait?”

“Nor there, sir. And the sky was clear. We would have seen a light at least four miles away.”

“Did the lamps function properly?”

“Yes, sir. From sunset to sunrise.”

“Was it cold in the duty room?”

14. Tierra del Fuego to Tierra de la Desolacion, between Cape Virgins and Cape Pilar. As Verne says in (ch. 2, Cape Virgins (near modern Dungeness Point, Argentina) and Cape Pilar (Chile) represent the Atlantic and Pacific entrances to the Strait of Magellan. The area described is basically the islands off the tip of South America.

Volume 1 of *Grant*, which follows a line of latitude across South America, pioneers many of the elements of *Lighthouse*: Fuegians, guanacos, and “an unknown cataclysm which pulverized this huge promontory [Tierra del Fuego] cast between two oceans” (I ix).

“No, sir. Not a draught. The double glazing keeps the wind out.”¹⁵

“We will take a look at the living quarters, and then the lighthouse.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” replied Vasquez.

Below the tower, the thick walls of the quarters could resist any Magellanic gusts of wind. The two officers visited the well-appointed rooms, safe from rain, cold, and snowstorms, which can be formidable at an almost Antarctic latitude.

A central corridor led to a gate to the tower.

“Let’s go up,” said Captain Lafayate.

“Aye-aye, sir.”

“Only you need come.”

Vasquez made a sign to his colleagues to stay at the end of the corridor. Then he opened the gate and the two officers followed him up. The narrow spiral, with stone steps set solidly in the walls, was bright, for a loophole lit each floor.

Reaching the duty room, one level below the lantern and apparatus, the two officers sat on a circular bench running round the wall. The entire horizon was visible through the four small windows.

The wind was moderate, but blew quite strongly at this height, mixed in with the sharp cries of seagulls, frigate birds, and albatrosses, which flew by on powerful wing-strokes.

Captain Lafayate and his first officer positioned themselves in front of each window, checking it was in good condition. Then, for a better view of the island and surrounding sea, they climbed the ladder to the gallery around the lantern.

The part of the island stretching westwards before their eyes was as deserted as the sea to the east and south. Equally deserted lay the strait to the north, too wide for its northern shore to be seen. At the foot of the tower curved Elgor Bay, busy with the sailors’ comings and goings, as well as the *Santa Fe* at anchor. Not a single sail or smokestack visible to sea. Nothing but the oceanic immensity!

After quarter of an hour on the lighthouse gallery, the two officers, followed by Vasquez, went down again and returned to their ship.

After lunch, Captain Lafayate and First Officer Riegal were set ashore once more. The hours before setting sail would be devoted to a walk along the left bank of Elgor Bay. Several times, and without a pilot - for it will be appreciated there were none on Staten Island - the captain had sailed in daylight to his usual mooring in the little inlet at the foot of the lighthouse. But he always took the precaution of carrying out a reconnaissance.

15. “The double glazing keeps the wind out.” In parallel with the next 150 words, the margin of the manuscript carries a different version in pencil, crossed out but legible.

So the two officers studied certain seamarks as they strolled. Sailing presented no difficulties here if one took care. The depth sufficed for a vessel like the *Santa Fe* anywhere in the bay, even at low tide. And now, thanks to the lighthouse, the bay would be easily navigable at night.

“What a pity,” said the captain, “that the approaches to this bay are so dangerous, with all those reefs stretching so far out to sea! Otherwise, ships in distress could anchor here. Remember, there’s nothing else after the Strait of Magellan.”¹⁶

What he said was only too true. But it will be a long time before a chart shows a harbor at the end of Elgor Bay, on the east coast of Staten Island!

At four o’clock the two officers took leave of Vasquez, Felipe, and Moriz and went back on board. The three stayed on shore in preparation for the ship’s departure.

At five o’clock pressure rose in the sloop’s boiler as she belched forth whirlwinds of black smoke. The tide would soon be turning, and as soon as it began to descend, the *Santa Fe* would be weighing anchor.

At 5:45 the captain gave orders to heave the capstan. The screw was ready and steam leaked from the pipes.

At the bow the first officer monitored operations; the anchor was soon apeak and secured in the cathead.

The *Santa Fe* got under way, to the farewells of the three lighthouse keepers. Whatever Vasquez’s thoughts, and whatever his comrades’ feelings as they watched the sloop depart, her officers and crew felt deeply for the three men they were leaving on this island at the tip of America.

The *Santa Fe* took her time as she followed the curves of Elgor Bay. Shortly before eight o’clock she reached the open sea. Rounding Cape San Juan,¹⁷ she sailed at full steam across the strait. When night fell, the beacon from the Lighthouse at the End of the World had faded to a star, grazing the horizon.¹⁸

16. the Strait of Magellan. Verne’s *Two Years’ Holiday* (1888) is set on real-life Hanover Island, less than ten miles from the Strait of Magellan, which provides “a shorter route than Le Maire Strait between Staten Island and Tierra del Fuego, and one less beaten by storms than that via Cape Horn” (*Two Years’ Holiday* xxvii).

17. Cape San Juan. Michel Verne [henceforth: MV] has a Gallicized “Saint-Jean” in place of the “San Juan” used by Jules Verne [henceforth: JV]. The cape, named by Noël Jouin from St. Malo (1706), was a synonym for shipwreck.

18. grazing the horizon. This ch. 1, with its display of self-conscious naval rituals, awareness of carrying the values of civilized existence, showing the flag, and triumphing over natural desolation, ironically underlines the evils soon to emerge from the shadows.

Michel concludes the chapter with a more poetic: “Captain Lafayate . . . gave the signal for departure. The sun was setting as he left the bay. | Suddenly a light shot out from the far shore, its reflection dancing on the wake. And the sloop,

moving away on the darkened sea, seemed to carry with it a few of the incalculable rays projected anew by the Lighthouse at the End of the World.”