

Essay #5:

## JULES VERNE AND PHANTOM PAIN

**Nick DiMartino**

I never thought of reading Jules Verne as useful for anything other than pure reading pleasure. That was permanently interrupted when Hugh in my amputee support group announced to the others that the secret of my life was Jules Verne therapy. It came out of nowhere and I was completely caught off-guard. He revealed that I enjoyed Jules Verne so much, I had twice accidentally read straight through Tuesday afternoon and missed the support group.

We all laughed. I was thoroughly embarrassed. I felt lucky to be one of the few not in pain. Then I couldn't get it out of my mind. Jules Verne was my reading joy, the light of my life, my new discovery, my teacher, my pleasure, my purpose.

But was he also my therapy?

Admittedly, when I listen to what other members of the support group suffer, I keep my mouth guiltily shut. I'm not suffering enough. I'm getting off easy. Sure, I lost a leg, but I'm an old man, I've lived my life as a two-legged guy, I was a daily 2-mile runner for twenty years through Ravenna Park and out the Burke Gilman Trail. I used to swim a quartermile after work. I used to bicycle.

With old age comes a certain grudging acceptance to saying goodbye to things.

Limb severance is a big goodbye. It leaves screaming nerves behind. As the stump of my right leg slowly grows smaller, why am I not writhing with jolts of agonizing phantom pain like so many of my friends in the support group? I'm one of the lucky ones.

It's not like I've never experienced it. I remember the first few times began with a muscle-spasm feeling like my toes were cramped in my shoe, like my stocking needed to be adjusted. Of course, there was no shoe, no stocking, no toes. Why was my brain telling me something that wasn't true? My shoe was too tight. My foot was cramped. I needed to loosen my shoestrings right away. No shoe, no shoestrings, no foot.

Then there were those flashes of excruciating phantom pain at unexpected moments for no reason you can think of, like you've just accidentally connected with an electrical socket. Every amputee has felt them. The experience is dreadful, like electric current misfiring under your skin.

But it's not real, is it? My brain is deceiving me. Funny, I thought I *was* my brain. How can I be fooling myself? It was traumatic for me to realize I *wasn't* my brain. Until then, that was my

sense of who I was. Stretched out in my hospital bed for weeks, I wasn't sure who I could trust anymore if my brain was lying. It was a nightmare. I was telling lies to myself. My leg is hurting. My leg isn't there.

Which opens up the big question: who am I then, if I'm not my brain?

I'm not sure what made me pick up *The Golden Volcano*. I'd had it for years. Maybe the idea of Jules Verne doing Jack London stuff. Maybe the idea of characters travelling toward the Pacific Northwest, where I live. An adventure story to pull me out of myself. Whatever caused it, I had no idea I was making a decision that would profoundly alter my reading life and take half a year to finish. I didn't realize Verne had written so many novels, all so different, so wide-ranging, or what a hypnotic storyteller he was.

And then there was the fact of being *included*. Verne has so many bachelors who aren't stigmatized for not being married. All my life, I've been the single person who couldn't find a partner. I've felt this failure. I didn't connect. In Verne, it's often *the* sensible thing to do. Men openly like other men, no guilt. Lots of hugging and coupling for life. Was I imagining things? These guys in Verne openly like each other – blatant male/male affection! It wasn't gay love, it wasn't hot bodies and casual sex. It was men openly caring about each other.

Of course, that aspect of Verne was spellbinding. Young heroes rescuing young men. Young men who like older guys. I couldn't be just imagining this. Book after book, Verne shows healthy men hanging out together, sleeping together to stay warm, sometimes holding hands. My eyes were popping out of my head.

Verne also dazzled me with his ingenuity and ability to try something new. Sometimes the stories were hilarious. Sometimes they were excruciating endurance tests. Sometimes they were heroic suspense. Then there were the satires. North Pole, South Pole, Brazil, Norway, China, Greece, England, Africa, South America, just about everywhere in the world and inside the earth and under the water and overhead.

What phantom pain? I just shift my leg and keep reading.

There was one attack in particular that was excruciating, the worst phantom pain by far, that happened while I was sitting in my armchair reading one evening. Suddenly, I was behaving like I'd gone temporarily spastic, just shouting with indignity and outrage at how painful it was, how unfair. But I was at an exciting place in the story. I refused to stop reading. To show the pain who was boss, to stubbornly continue with my pleasure in spite of the annoying pain, I forced myself to keep reading.

Not until then did I realize Verne's therapeutic properties. While I continued reading (struggling for survival in sub-zero weather somewhere near the South Pole) the phantom pain was not an issue. I could feel it there, I knew that rippling, surging, burning sensation was misfiring nerves and nothing real, nothing that was going to go on bothering me for long. What gripped me instead was Verne's story, revealed to me in incremental suspense, the dispensing of carefully placed nuggets of information that slowly begin to add up to something else, and then something more, and then something else again.

I let Verne's heroic dog rescue or surprise moment of friendship or erupting volcano or attack of howling baboons keep my mind so busy it forgets or ignores the mindless pain generated by the leg that's no longer there.