



Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

Part 12.

The Pirate Attack on Birkenhead.

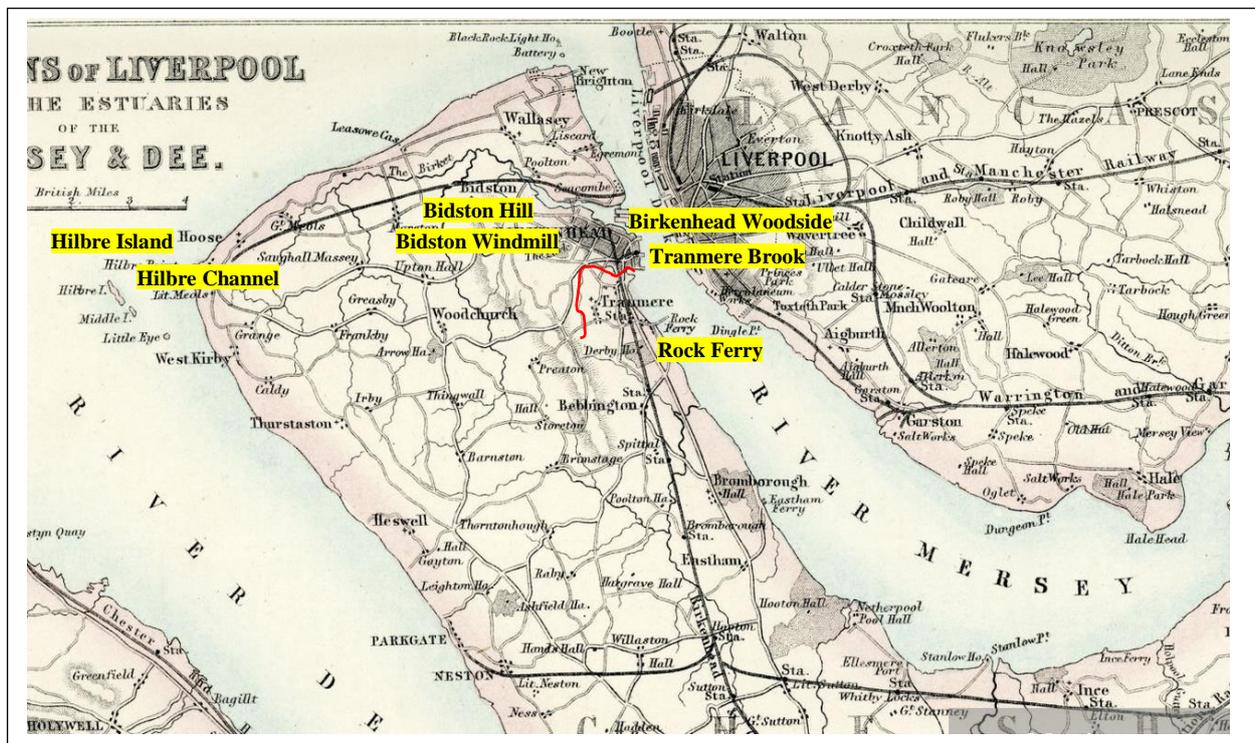
By John Lamb

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Part 12. The Pirate Attack on Birkenhead.

- PIRATES ARE SIGHTED OFF BIRKENHEAD –
- BIDSTON WINDMILL LOSES ITS SAILS –
- THE PIRATES INVADE HILBRE ISLAND –
- SIX PIRATES LAND AT ROCK FERRY –
- THE BOMBARDMENT OF BIRKENHEAD –
- CAPTAIN NEMO COMES TO THE RESCUE–

The Wirral locations used by Jules Verne in part 12.



Pirates are Sighted Off Birkenhead.

In 1863 the United States Government of Abraham Lincoln briefly considered sending a naval squadron to Great Britain on a secret mission – the secret mission would be the naval bombardment of Birkenhead.

It is with the ultimate irony that on Jules Verne's *Lincoln Island*, the town of Birkenhead will suffer a naval bombardment ... not at the hands of Abraham Lincoln but at the hands of some of the most feared pirates that ever roamed the South Pacific.

Abraham Lincoln (1809 – 1865)



Lincoln Island will be attacked by the pirate ship *Speedy* and the former crew mates of Thomas Ayrton, a repentant pirate who the colonists have rescued from exile on the neighbouring Tabor Island. Thomas Ayrton, a figure from Verne's previous novel *The Children of Captain Grant* (1867) will play an increasingly important role in our story. Jules Verne writes of Ayrton.

It was evident that if the castaway had ever been a civilised being, loneliness had made him a savage and perhaps worse, a veritable creature of the woods.

Ayrton - Cyrus Harding put his hand on his shoulder.

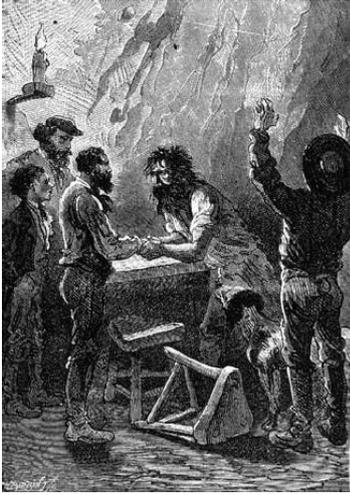
There is a definite mystery in this man's life," said Gideon Spilett, "and it seems that he will return to humanity only by the path of remorse."

"If he doesn't speak, it's because, I believe, that he has on his mind things which are too terrible to talk about."

Ayrton later saves Herbert from the clutches of a ferocious jaguar as he begins to atone for his piratical past.

He had grabbed the jaguar by the throat.





Jules Verne then invokes the words of John Newton – a former slave captain who became a Liverpool chaplain and leading abolitionist. Newton penned the song *Amazing Grace* – an anthem of the modern American Civil Rights movement. Cyrus Harding says of Ayrton.

“The poor wretch....he still has a soul within him, a soul we’ll save!”

"This is my hand!" said the engineer.

Thomas Ayrton will play a pivotal role in the destruction of the pirate ship *Speedy* as it attacks Granite House / Birkenhead. Jules Verne will then be allowed to open a whole new historical narrative on his *Mysterious Island* – one that brings to the fore, Birkenhead’s historic involvement in the American Civil War.

Herbert first discovers the pirate ship using the photographic equipment anonymously supplied by Captain Nemo in the sea chest washed up at Flotsam Point (Rock Ferry).

It was the month of October. The spring had returned in full measure. Nature was renewing itself beneath the warm rays of the sun. Among the evergreen conifers which formed the border of the woods, new foliage was already appearing in the nettle trees, banksias, and deodars.

Gideon Spilett and Herbert, as mentioned, had taken several photographs of Lincoln Island at various times. Now, on the October 17th, about three o’clock in the afternoon, Herbert, fascinated by the clearness of the sky, decided to photograph all of Union Bay facing Grand View Plateau from Mandible Cape to Cape Claw.

The horizon was admirably clear, and the sea, undulating under a gentle breeze, seemed as still as the waters of a lake, broken here and there with a white spray.

The lens of the camera was placed at one of the windows of the large hall in Granite House, overlooking the beach and the bay. Herbert proceeded in the usual way. After he obtained the negative, he went to fix it with substances stored in the dark room in Granite House.

Returning to full light, Herbert examined it carefully. He saw a small imperceptible blemish on the sea’s horizon. He tried to make it disappear by washing it a few times, but he did not succeed.

“It’s a defect in the lens,” he thought.

And then, out of curiosity, he examined this imperfection with a strong magnifying lens removed from one of the telescopes. He had barely glanced at it when he suddenly uttered a cry, and the photographic plate almost fell from his hands.



Running immediately to the room where Cyrus Harding was, he held out the plate and the lens to the engineer, indicating to him the small speck.

Cyrus Harding examined it; then seizing the telescope, he ran toward the window.

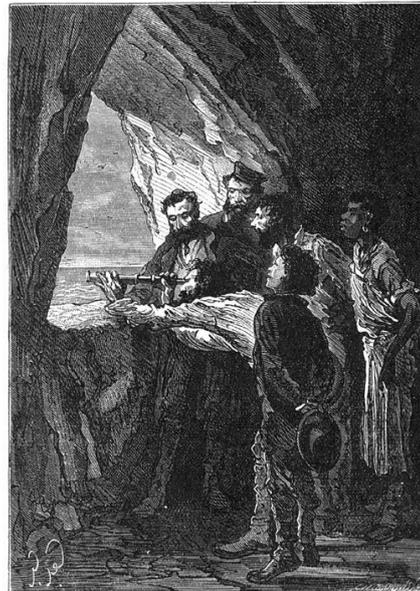
The telescope, after slowly sweeping the horizon, finally stopped at the suspicious point. Then Cyrus Harding, lowering the instrument, uttered one single word: "Ship!"

And, indeed, there was a ship in sight of Lincoln Island.

The engineer examined the speck

Cyrus Harding and Herbert immediately called Gideon Spilett, Pencroft and Neb into the large hall of Granite House and told them what had happened. Pencroft, seizing the telescope, rapidly scanned the horizon and stopped on the speck which had made the nearly imperceptible blemish on the photographic negative.

A thousand devils! It really is a ship!" he said in a voice that did not denote extraordinary satisfaction.



Ayrton took the telescope.



The ship draws closer and Pencroft is keen to learn whether the vessel could be the colonists' salvation or whether the crew have more sinister intentions.

At that moment, a breeze opened the unknown flag. Ayrton seized the telescope that the sailor had put down, raised it to his eye and, in a hollow voice, cried out:

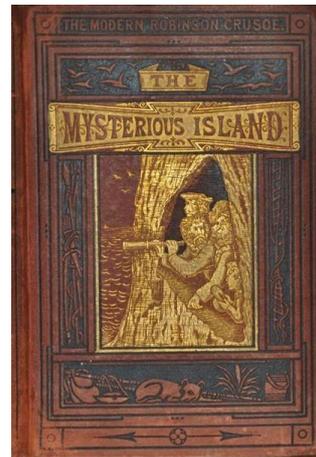
"The black flag!"

Indeed, a dark banner unfurled from the peak of the brig's mast, and it was with good reason that they should now consider this a suspicious vessel.

"The Black Flag!"

On November 6th, 1865, a real-life ‘pirate ship’ entered the River Mersey and anchored in the Tranmere Sloyne, just off Woodside, Birkenhead. It is this pirate ship that will inspire Jules Verne’s storyline.

Before the battle with the pirate ship, we should remember that Jules Verne has rearranged his ‘stage scenery’.



Front cover 1st edition *Mysterious Island* (1875).

Jules Verne imitates a movie director and merges two locations to create one scene for his fictional pirate battle. He moves Hilbre Island (Safety Islet) to lie off Birkenhead (Granite House). The pirate battle will thus take place in two outdoor ‘stage sets’ at the same time.



The two locations are the deep-water channel of the Mersey, just off Birkenhead, Woodside and in the shallow tidal channel between Hilbre Island and the mainland (Hoylake).



If we merge these two maps, we get the dual scenes of the pirate attack, and our combined ‘stage set’ is complete.



Two locations create the ‘merged’ scene of the pirate attack.

Bidston Windmill Loses its Sails.

Whatever the case, we must do everything to conceal our presence here. The windmill on Grand View Plateau is easy to recognize. Let Ayrton and Neb take down the arms.



The outline of Bidston windmill on the ridge of Bidston Hill, Birkenhead.

Let's also hide the branches of Granite House under thick branches. Let all fires be extinguished. Nothing must betray the presence of man on this island.



Granite House (The Great Culvert Sewer).

"Who knows?" Pencroft then said. "Perhaps this cursed ship will have gone on its way during the night, and we'll no longer find it there at daybreak."

As if in response to the sailor's remark, a bright flash appeared at sea and a cannon resounded.

The vessel was still there, and it had artillery on board.

Six seconds elapsed between the flash and the roar. The brig was thus approximately a mile and a quarter from shore.

At the same time they heard the noise of chains grating through its hawse-holes.

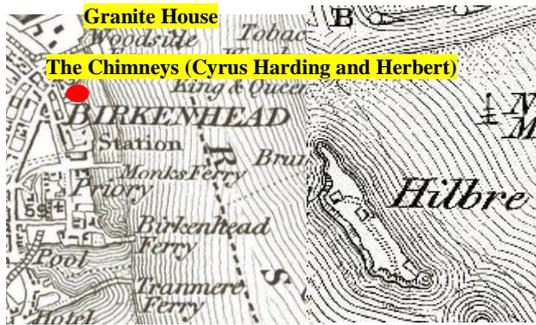
The vessel had anchored in sight of Granite House!

At daybreak, the colonists were able to catch a glimpse of a dark hulk through the morning fog.

The hull of the real-life pirate ship, disguised in dark paint had anchored overnight near the Mersey Bar, it entered the River Mersey on the foggy morning of November 6th, 1865.

"Here, my friends," the engineer then said, "are the preparations which seems to me best to make before the fog lifts completely. The fog hides us from the eyes of the pirates, so we must act without arousing their attention. What's especially important is to lead the convicts to believe that there are many inhabitants on the island capable of resisting them.

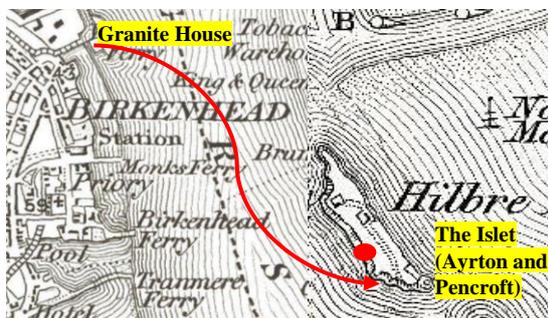
I therefore propose that we divide into three groups, the first posted here at the Chimneys, and the second at the mouth of the Mercy. As for the third, I think that it would be wise to post it on the islet in order to repel or at least delay any landing attempt.



Cyrus Harding and Herbert were to remain at the Chimneys so as to command the shore at the foot of Granite House over a large radius.



Gideon Spilett and Neb went to crouch amongst the rocks at the mouth of the Mercy – the bridge there as well as the other bridges had been lifted – with the task of repelling any passage by boat and even any landing on the opposite shore.



As for Ayrton and Pencroft, they crossed the channel with the canoe to occupy two separate posts on the islet. In this way, there would be gunfire from four different points, and the convicts would think that the island was well populated and would be vigorously defended.

The pirates launch a rowing boat, and it heads for the islet (Hilbre Island).

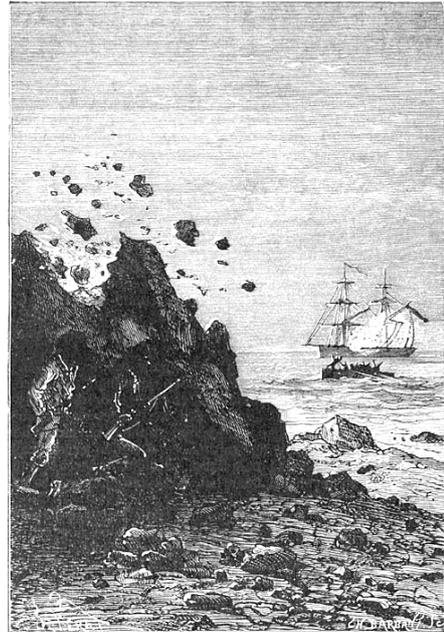
The tidal channel between Hilbre Island and the mainland.



Pirates Land on Hilbre Island

A few pirates, perched in the topgallant mast, had evidently been able to see that an islet protected the coast and was separated from it by a channel about a half mile wide. By observing the direction followed by the boat, Cyrus Harding soon realized that they would not move directly into the channel but would, more prudently, first land on the islet.

Almost immediately, a more violent detonation was heard. A bright puff of smoke arose from the brig's broadside, and a cannonball struck the top of the rocks which sheltered Ayrton and Pencroft, bursting into splinters but not touching the two marksmen.

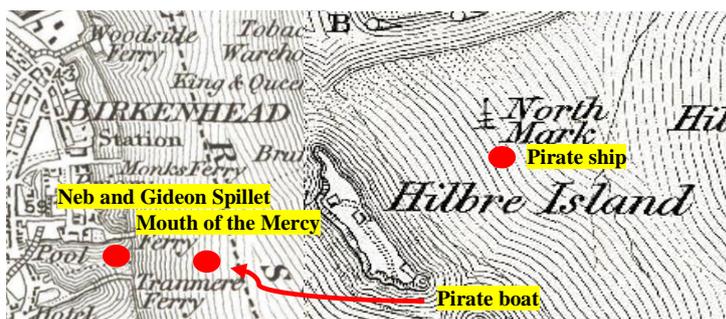


A cannonball struck the rocks.

Instead of returning on board, as one might have expected, the boat continued along the shore of the islet, heading towards its southern point. The pirates were pulling the oars hard in order to put themselves outside the range of weapons.



Pencroft and Ayrton well understood that they risked being surrounded, but they did not leave their post, not wanting to expose themselves either to their assailants or to the Speedy's cannons. They counted on Neb and Gideon Spillet, on guard at the mouth of the river, and on Cyrus Harding, posted among the rocks at the Chimneys.

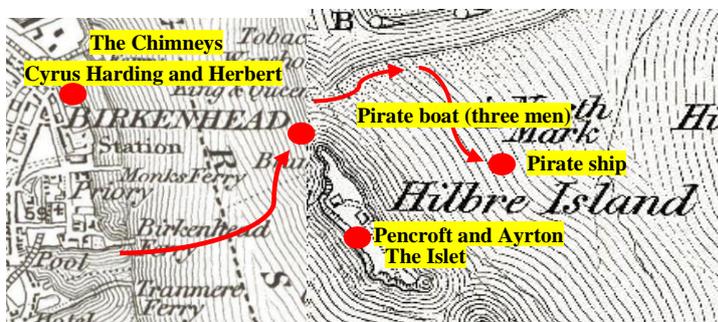


Twenty minutes after the first gunshots, the boat was at least two cable lengths off the Mercy's entrance.

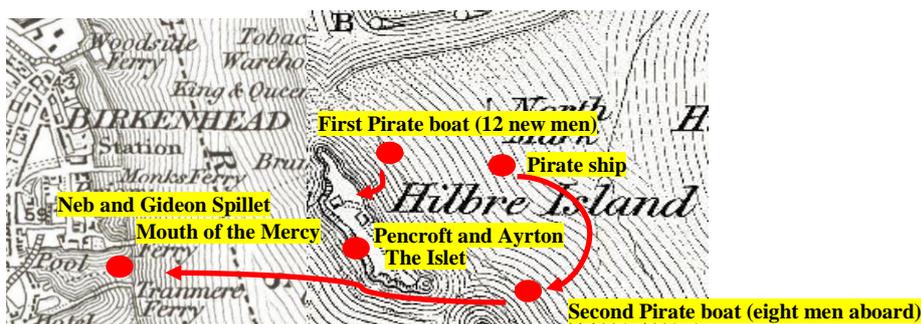
Since the tide had begun to rise with its usual swiftness, increased by the narrow opening, the convicts felt themselves drawn toward the river and only by rowing hard did they manage to stay in the middle of the channel. But as they passed within easy range of the mouth of the Mercy, two shots greeted them, and two more of their number fell into the boat. Neb and Spillet had not wasted their rounds.

The brig immediately fired a second round at the post betrayed by the smoke of their firearms, but only succeeded in shattering some rocks.

At this moment, the boat held only three able bodied men. Carried by the strong current, it moved along the channel with the rapidity of an arrow, passing in front of Cyrus Harding and Herbert who, out of easy range, remained silent. Then, with its two remaining oars, it rounded the northern point of the islet and headed back to the brig.



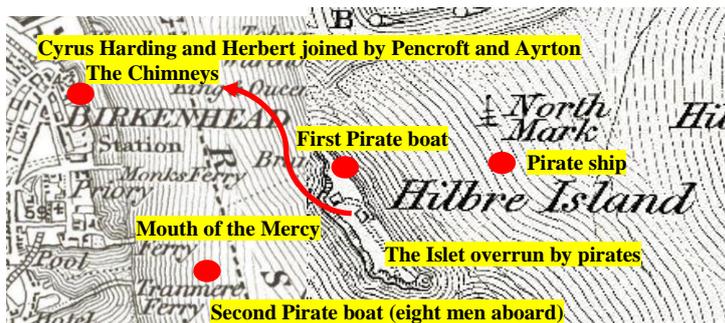
But then about twelve other convicts, filled with anger and perhaps still drunk from the previous evening, got into the boat. A second boat was also lowered to the sea with eight men on board. While the first one moved straight to the islet to flush out the colonists, the second went to force the entrance to the Mercy.



Six Pirates Land at Rock Ferry.

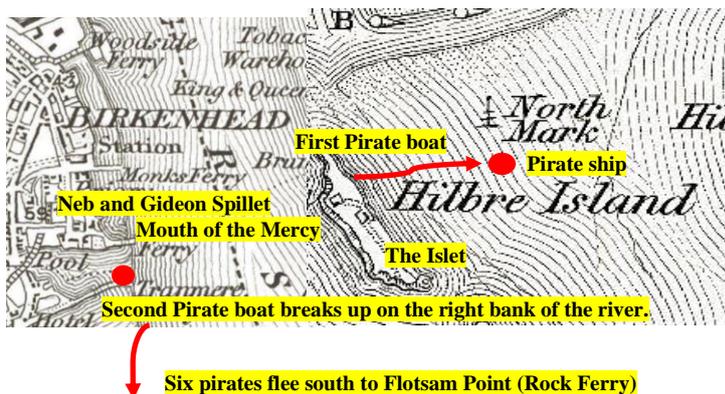
The situation had evidently become very perilous for Pencroft and Ayrton. They realized that they must get back to the mainland.

However, they still waited for the first boat to come within range, and two well-placed bullets produced a turmoil among its crew. Then Pencroft and Ayrton abandoned their post, exposing themselves to a dozen or so shots, crossed the islet as fast as their limbs could carry them, threw themselves into the canoe, crossed the channel, and ran to hide in the Chimneys just as the second boat reached the southern point. They had scarcely rejoined Cyrus Harding and Herbert when the islet was completely overrun by the pirates from the first boat.



At nearly the same moment, new detonations burst forth from the post at the Mercy which the second boat rapidly approached. Two of the eight men it carried were mortally wounded by Gideon Spilett and Neb, and the boat itself, not being able to avoid the reef, broke up at the mouth of the Mercy. But the six survivors, raising their weapons above their heads so as to preserve them from contact with the water, succeeded in setting foot on the right bank of the river. Then finding themselves exposed to close fire from the post, they fled with all possible speed in the direction of Flotsam Point.

The first pirate boat and ten sailors return to the pirate ship.



The six pirates escaping to Flotsam Point (Rock Ferry) represent the six pirates who absconded from our real-life pirate ship while anchored off Rock Ferry, Birkenhead on November 6th, 1865.

The Bombardment of Birkenhead.

The Speedy began to lift anchor with the intention of approaching the islet. The tide would still be high for an hour and a half, and with the tide's current now at a standstill, it would be easy to maneuver the brig. But as for entering the channel, Pencroft, contrary to Ayrton, did not believe that they would dare to attempt it.

During this time, the pirates who occupied the islet moved over to the opposite bank little by little, and only the channel now separated them from the mainland. They were armed with simple weapons that could not harm the colonist lying in wait at the Chimneys and at the mouth of the Mercy.

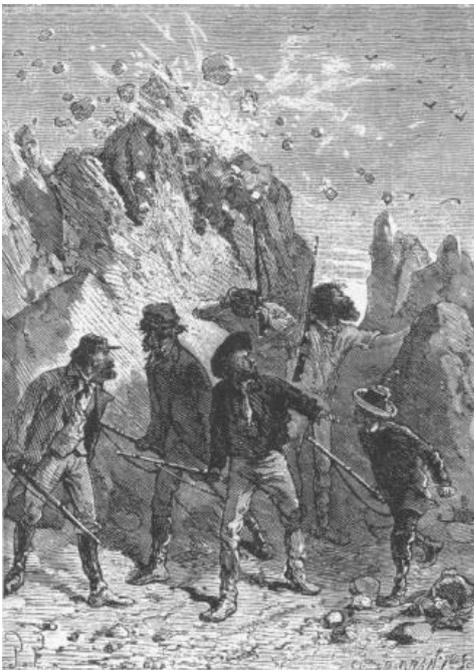
The Speedy was first pulled toward its anchor; then, when the latter had been wrenched from the bottom, the brig began to drift toward land. The wind blew from the open sea; the large jig and the small topsail were hoisted and, little by little, the vessel came nearer to shore.

Soon the Speedy reached the islet's point; it turned with ease; the spanker sail was then full and the brig, propelled by the wind found itself facing the Mercy.

The bandits are coming!" shouted Pencroft.

At this moment, Cyrus Harding, Ayrton, the sailor, and Herbert were joined by Neb and Gideon Spilett.

But the cursed brig had entered the channel.



"Do you have a plan, Cyrus?" asked the reporter.

"We must take refuge in Granite House while there's still time and the convicts can't see us."

There was not an instant to lose. The colonists left the chimneys. An angle in the rock face protected them from being seen; but two or three detonations and the shattering of shells against the rocks informed them that the Speedy was close at hand.

There was not an instant to lose.

They quickly threw themselves into the elevator, hoisted themselves to the door of Granite House where Top and Jup had been shut up since the previous evening, and rushed into the large hall.

Captain Nemo Comes to the Rescue

They did so just in time because the colonists, through the branches, now saw the Speedy moving through the channel, wreathed by gunsmoke, firing incessantly, and the balls from its four cannons crashing blindly on their earlier post at the Mercy and the Chimneys. Rocks were shattered, and hurrahs accompanied each detonation.

They still hoped that Granite House might be spared thanks to the fact that Cyrus Harding had concealed the windows, when a cannon ball grazed the doorway and crashed through into the hallway.

“The wretches! Have they found us?” Shouted Pencroft.

The colonists had perhaps not yet been seen, but it was certain that Bob Harvey had judged it appropriate to fire a shot through the suspicious foliage that covered this portion of the high wall. And he soon increased his fire when a ball tore apart this screen of foliage, exposing a large opening in the granite.



The situation was now desperate for the colonists. Their retreat had been discovered.



They could not protect themselves against these projectiles nor prevent damage to the stone whose splinters were flying all around them like grape-shot. They could only take refuge in the upper passageway of Granite House and abandon their dwelling to complete destruction when, suddenly, they heard a rumbling sound followed by terror-stricken cries.

Cyrus Harding and his companions ran to one of his windows.

The brig, violently raised aloft by a sort of waterspout, had just split in half! And, in less than ten seconds, it had sunk to the bottom with all its criminal crew!

The brig violently raised aloft.

“They’ve blown up!” exclaimed Herbert.

“Yes! Blown up just as if Ayrton had ignited their powder,” replied Pencroft, jumping into the lift along with Neb and the lad.

“But what happened?” asked Gideon Spilett, still stupefied by this unexpected denouement.

“Ah! This time we’ll know ...” answered the engineer. “What will we know? ...”

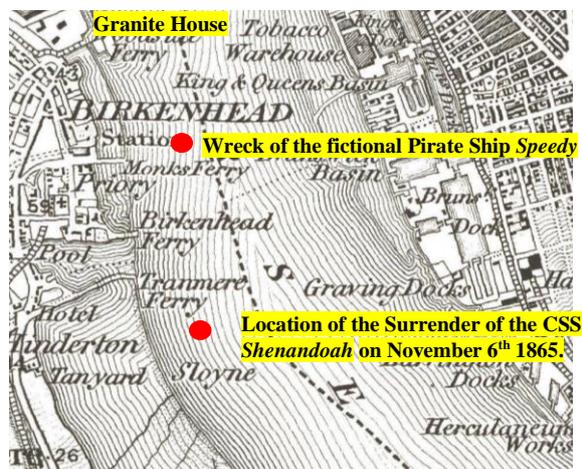
“Later! Come Spilett. The important thing is that these pirates have been killed!”

And Cyrus Harding, accompanied by the reporter and Ayrton, joined Pencroft, Neb and Herbert on the beach.

It later transpires that Captain Nemo has blown up the pirate ship and saved the lives of the colonists.

Our real-life pirate ship approaching Birkenhead was the Confederate warship the CSS *Shenandoah*, which on November 6th, 1865, surrendered in the Tranmere Sloyne just off Birkenhead.

The surrender of the CSS *Shenandoah* at Birkenhead was the last act of the American Civil War.



Real and Imaginary Worlds.



Abraham Lincoln had previously condemned the crew of the CSS *Shenandoah* as ‘pirates’.

The final surrender of the CSS *Shenandoah* on the River Mersey at Tranmere Sloyne, Birkenhead on Nov 6th, 1865. (E.D. Walker).

It is a testimony to the brilliance of Jules Verne that the dreams of the pirates have been destroyed by Captain Nemo in virtually the same spot where the ‘pirate ship’ the CSS *Shenandoah* pulled down the Confederate flag for the last time – the end of the Confederacy and the final act of the American Civil War.

If the real struggle for Civil Rights started with the end of the Confederacy, then that struggle did not start at Appomattox Court House, Virginia on April 9th, 1865, but at Birkenhead, England on November 6th, 1865 - the symbolism will not be lost on Jules Verne.

Nothing of the brig could be seen, not even its mast. After having been raised by the waterspout, it was thrown on its side and had foundered in this position, doubtless due to some enormous leak in its hull. But inasmuch as the channel at this point measured less than twenty feet in depth, it was certain that the sides of the sunken brig would appear at low tide.

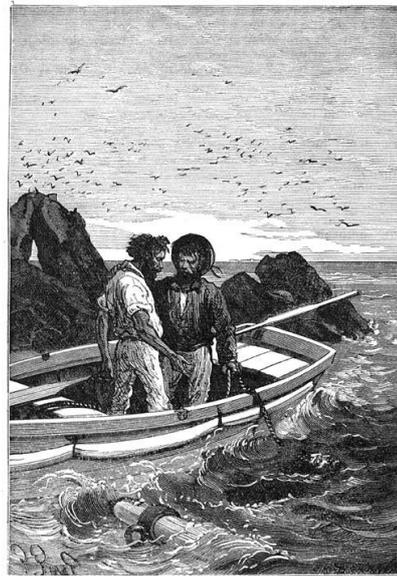
Some wreckage was floating on the surface of the sea. They saw spare masts and yards, poultry cages with their occupants still living, crates and barrels which little by little rose to the surface after escaping through the hatchways. But there was no other drifting debris, neither planking from the deck nor timber from the hull, and the sinking of the Speedy seemed more inexplicable.

The tide was then slack and very high since there had been a new moon two days earlier. It would be at least an hour before the hull of the brig would emerge from the water.

A few bodies were floating on the surface. Among the others, Ayrton recognized that of Bob Harvey. He pointed him out to his companions, saying with a voice full of emotion:

“That’s what I have been, Pencroft!”

“But what you are no longer, my good Ayrton!” replied the sailor.



“That’s what I have been, Pencroft!”

Ayrton is now a fully reformed and repentant pirate, he has earned the ultimate respect of Pencroft, the honest northern sailor.

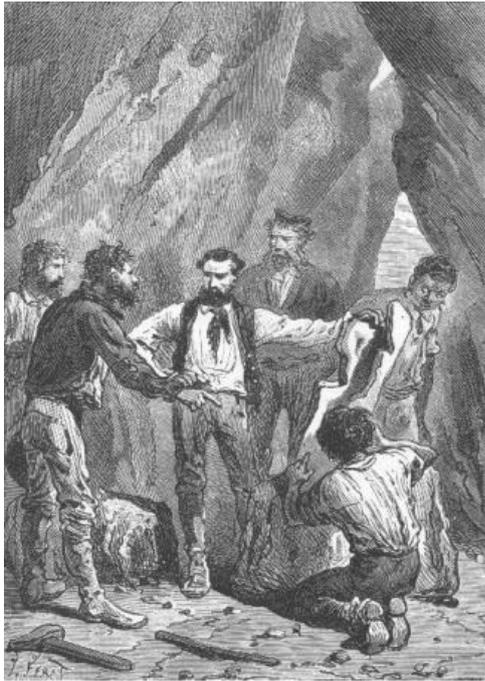
For two hours, Cyrus Harding and his companions were busy hauling the spars onto the beach and stretching out the perfectly intact sails to dry. They spoke little, since their work absorbed them, but what thoughts were on their minds! The brig contained a true fortune in cargo. In fact, a ship is like a small complete world, and the colony would gain many useful items. It would be, on a larger scale, like the trunk found at Flotsam Point.

The colonists manage to salvage many of the ship’s possessions over the next three days of low spring tides. There are, of course, no tides in the South Pacific Ocean, but in ‘our world’ the low tides of the Mersey and Dee will allow the colonists easy access to the wreck of the pirate ship.

The mystery as to how the Speedy was destroyed is finally solved a few weeks later.

However, the mystery of its strange destruction would be doubtless never have been cleared up if, on the 30th of November, Neb, while, roaming about the beach, had not found a thick piece of an iron cylinder which bore the traces of an explosion. This cylinder was twisted and broken as if it had been subjected to the action of an explosive substance.

Neb brought this piece of metal to his master who was then occupied with his companions at the Chimneys workshop.



Cyrus Harding examined this cylinder carefully and then, turning to Pencroft:

“You persist, my friend,” he said to him, “in maintaining that the Speedy did not perish as a result of the collision?”

“Yes, Mr. Cyrus,” replied the sailor, “you know as well as I do that there are no rocks in the channel.”

“But if it had run up against this piece of iron?” said the engineer, showing him the broken cylinder.

“What, this stump of pipe?” shouted Pencroft, with a completely incredulous tone.

“This?” replied Pencroft.

“Well, do you want to know what brought on this waterspout? It was this,” said the engineer, showing the broken tube.

“This?” replied Pencroft.

“Yes! This cylinder is all that remains of a torpedo.”

“A torpedo!” exclaimed the engineer’s companions.

“And who put this torpedo there?” Asked Pencroft.

“All that I can tell you is that it wasn’t I!” answered Cyrus Harding.

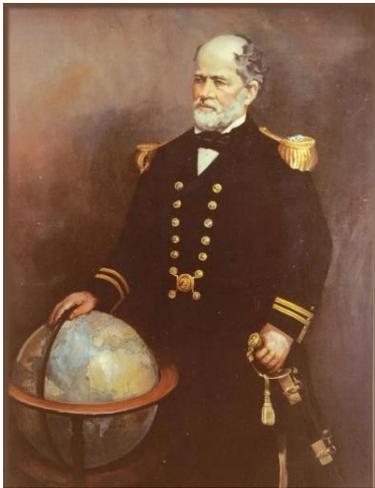
“But it was there, and you were all able to see the effects of its incomparable power!”

So, this torpedo explained the underwater explosion. Cyrus Harding, who during the war of the Union had had occasion to experiment with these terrible agents of destruction, was not mistaken. Because this cylinder had been loaded with an explosive substance – nitroglycerin, picrate, or other material of like nature – the water in the channel had erupted like a waterspout.

The use of a 'torpedo' is a reference to the explosive mine operated by electric cable and developed by Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806–1873), author of *The Physical Geography of the Sea* (1855), christened "Pathfinder of the Seas" and widely accepted as the father of modern oceanography.

Prior to the American Civil War, Maury mapped the 'Telegraphic Plateau' on the seabed of the Atlantic Ocean and worked with both Cyrus Field and Samuel Morse on the development of the first (1857) Transatlantic cable, half of which was manufactured in Birkenhead.

Maury fought for the Confederacy in the American Civil War and his invention of a 'torpedo mine' operated by cable is said "to have cost the Union more vessels than all other causes combined."



Maury's family lived in Birkenhead after the American Civil War, possibly under the hospitality of John Laird.

Maury was also a good friend of the Reverend Francis Tremlett and later lived with him at Belsize Park in London. Both John Laird (the builder, in fiction, of the hull of Captain Nemo's Nautilus) and Francis Tremlett were members of the Royal Mersey Yacht Club of Tranmere, Birkenhead.

Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806–1873)

In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* Captain Nemo is a great admirer of Mathew Fontaine Maury and keeps a collection of his works amongst the 12,000-volume library aboard his Birkenhead built *Nautilus*. Maury was the first oceanographer to accurately map the world's ocean currents and his work was significant in cutting sailing times across the globe. Nemo would say of Maury.

....I fully support the scientist Maury, who discovered a circulation in it just as real as that of the blood in animals.

Jules Verne *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869).

Maury's relative James Maury (1746 -1840) was the first United States Consul in Liverpool having been appointed by George Washington in 1790. The Maury family had a long-standing presence in Liverpool and were well respected locally.

Captain Nemo has therefore turned the Confederates' most feared weapon upon themselves and in their own 'back yard' – again, the true genius of Jules Verne.

Next on Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

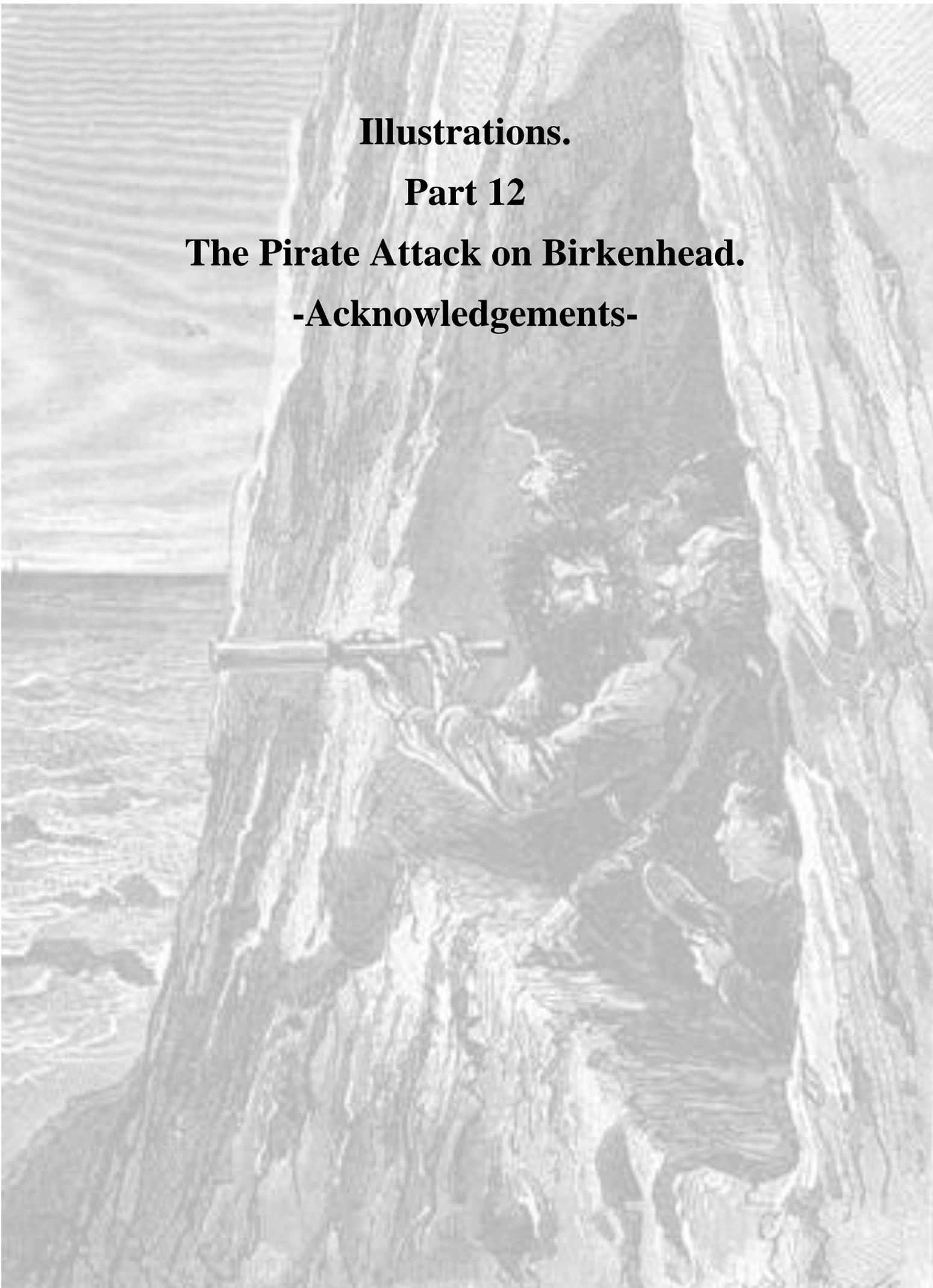
Part 13. Why There is no Rock at Rock Ferry.

Illustrations.

Part 12

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-Acknowledgements-



Page	Photograph Acknowledgement	Page	Photograph Acknowledgement
1a	TRIXES Large French Flag	8b	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey
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6c	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	15a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
6d	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	16a	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
6e	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	17a	Wikipedia.org
7a	John Lamb	18	-
7b	John Lamb	19	Wikisource – La Bibliotheque Libre
8a	Wirralmapreproductions Ordnance Survey	20	-