



Jules Verne and The Heroes of Birkenhead.

Part 14.

The Return of Captain Nemo.

By John Lamb

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The Return of Captain Nemo.

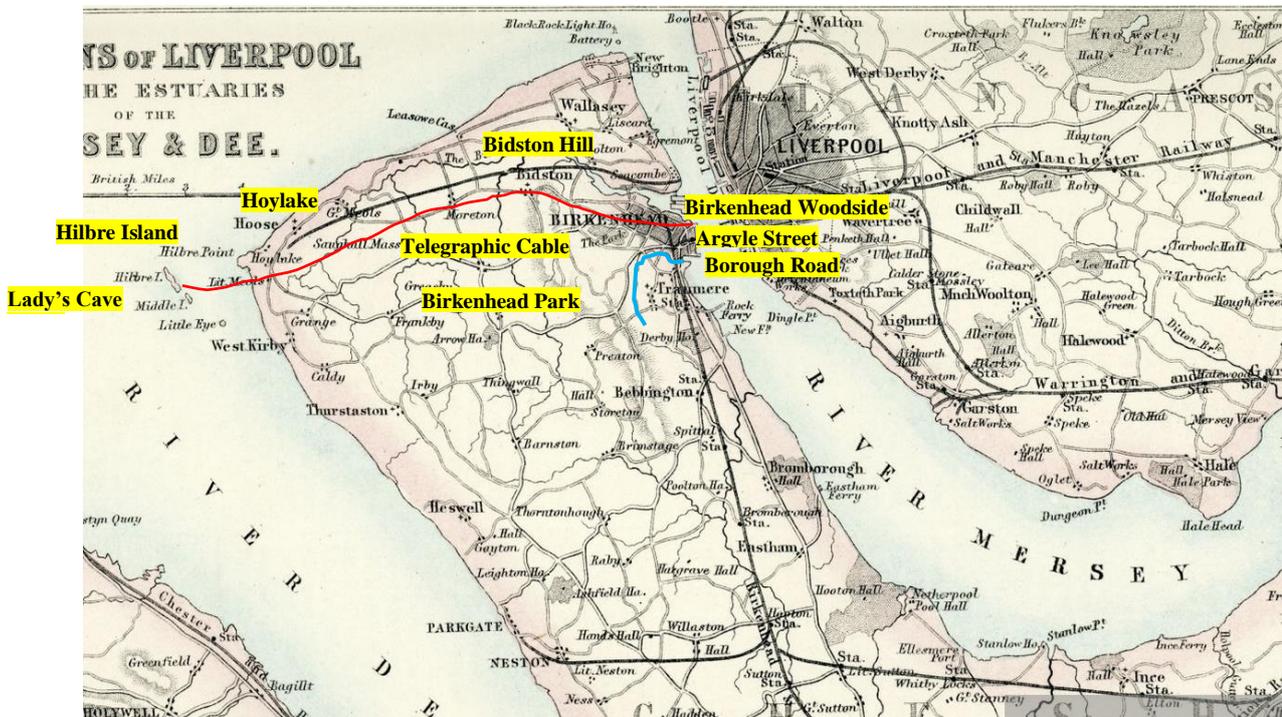
– THE TELEGRAPHIC CABLE FROM BIDSTON OBSERVATORY TO THE ONE
O’CLOCK GUN –

–THE NEW TELEGRAPHIC CABLE TO HILBRE ISLAND –

–LADY’S CAVE HILBRE ISLAND –

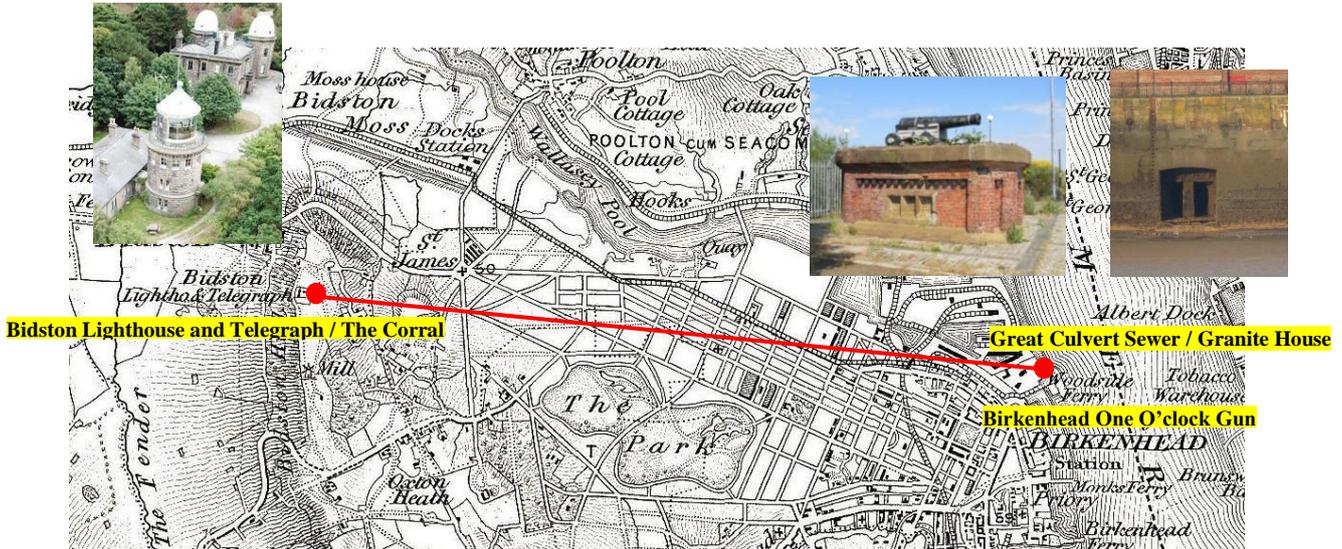
–DAKKAR’S GROTTO AND THE NAUTILUS–

The Wirral Locations Used in Part 14



The Telegraphic Cable to Bidston Observatory.

After four long years, Captain Nemo finally makes himself known to the colonists by sending a message down the electric telegraph cable connecting The Corral to Granite House - this is the real-life telegraphic cable connecting Bidston Observatory to the Birkenhead One O'clock Gun.



The approximate route of the Telegraphic firing Cable connecting Bidston Observatory to the Birkenhead One O'clock Gun at Birkenhead, Woodside.

One evening, October 15th, the conversation on such questions was prolonged more than usual. It was nine o'clock in the evening. Already poorly concealed yawns announced bedtime, and Pencroft was about to turn in when the electric bell, placed in the room, suddenly rang.

All were there, Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Ayrton, Pencroft and Neb. None of the colonists were at the corral.

Cyrus Harding got up. His companions looked at each other, thinking that they had not heard correctly.

But who could it be? Asked Neb.

"Perhaps replied Pencroft, "It's the one who... ?

The sentence was cut short by a new vibration of the bell.

Cyrus Harding went towards the apparatus and, turning on the current, sent this request to the Corral:

"What do you wish?

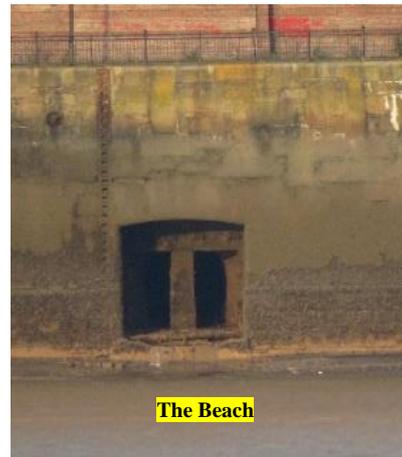
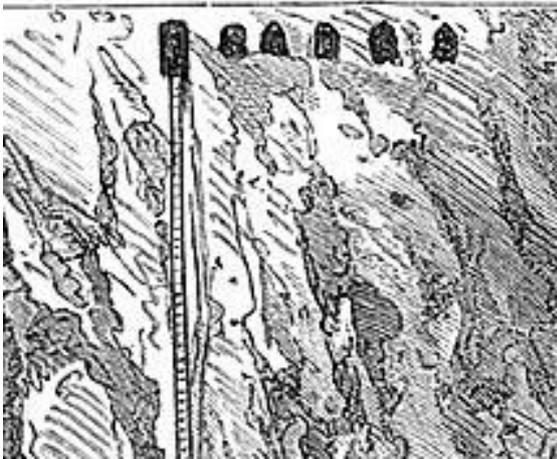
A few moments later the needle moved across the alphabetical dial and gave this response to the occupants of Granite House:

“Come to the Corral with all speed possible.

“At last!” exclaimed Cyrus Harding.

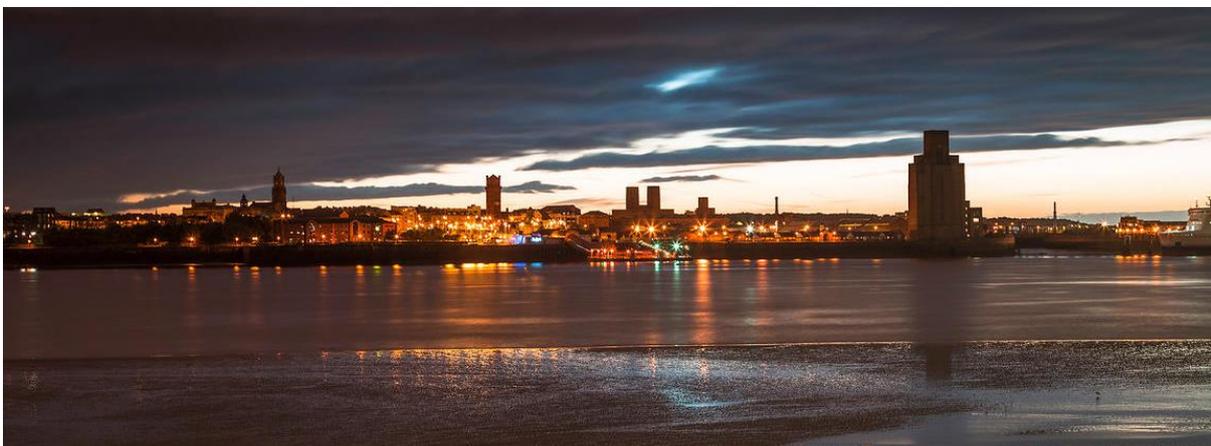
“Yes! At last! The mystery was about to be revealed! This consuming curiosity, which would take the colonists toward the Corral, made all their fatigue, and need for sleep instantly disappear.

Without saying a word, they left Granite House and, in a few moments, they found themselves on the beach.



Granite House or in ‘our reality’ the Great Culvert Sewer at Birkenhead, Woodside.

The night was dark. The moon, new that very day, had disappeared at the same time as the sun. As Herbert had noted, large storm clouds formed a low heavy canopy which hid the light from the stars.



Large storm clouds gather over Birkenhead, Woodside.

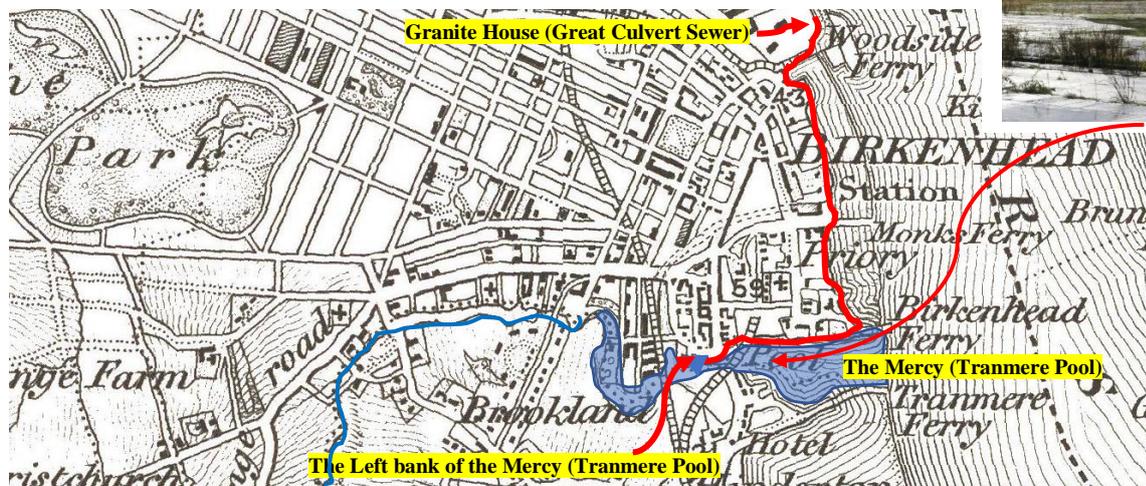
A few lightning flashes from a distance storm lit up the horizon.

It was possible that, a few hours later, the lightning would strike the island itself. It was a threatening night.

But the darkness, as deep as it was, could not hinder these men who were familiar with the route to the corral.

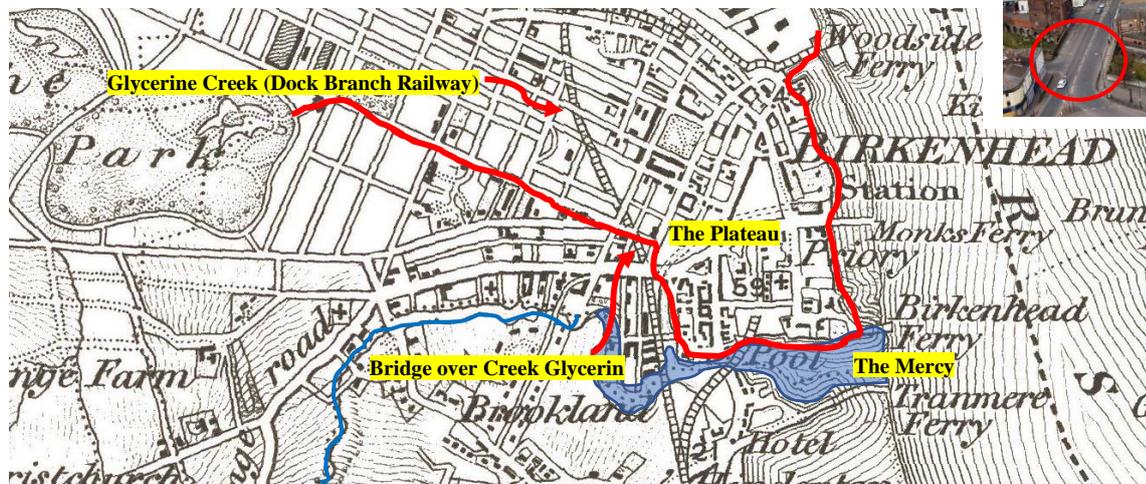
They ascended the left bank of the Mercy,

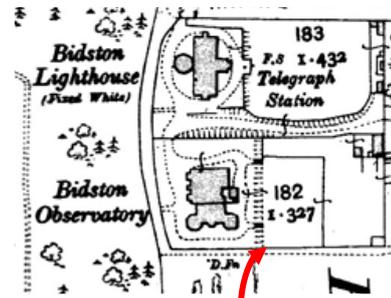
Old Birkenhead Gasworks Site -
The Site of Tranmere Pool (Mercy River)



reached the plateau, passed the bridge over Glycerine Creek,

Argyle Street, Birkenhead – The Bridge
Over Glycerine Creek.





Corral Perimeter Wall

**Bidston Observatory /
Lighthouse and Telegraph
Station and the 'Corral wall'**

The colonists enter the Corral.

The corral was crossed in an instant, and Cyrus Harding found himself in front of the house.

Cyrus Harding opened the door, and the colonists entered the very dark room.

This may be referring to the lighthouse keeper's cottage built in 1872 and referred to as *Telegraph Station* on the detailed map of Bidston Hill (above).

Neb struck a light, and an instant later a lantern was lit and directed into every corner of the room...

No one was there. Things were exactly as they had left them.

"Have we been the victims of an illusion?" murmured Cyrus Harding.

No! It was not possible! The telegram had clearly said:

"Come to the corral with all possible speed."

They approached the table where the telegraph sat. Everything was in place, the battery and the box which housed it, as well as the receiver and the transmitter.

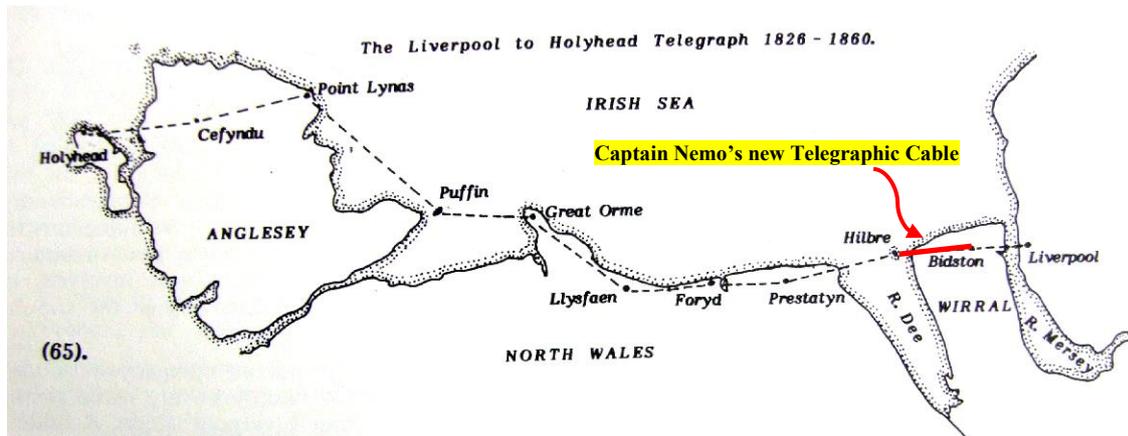
"Ah a message!" shouted Herbert pointing to a sheet of paper on the table.

On this sheet were written these words in English:

"Follow the new wire."

Jules Verne is now going to follow the wire from Bidston Observatory to Hilbre Island, this is the Liverpool to Holyhead telegraph cable which followed the same line as the original semaphore system established in 1826 and was converted to an electric cable in 1860.

In *Mysterious Island*, the Bidston to Hilbre cable will become a new cable laid by Captain Nemo connecting the corral to 'Dakkar's Grotto'.



The Liverpool to Holyhead Telegraphic Cable Route post 1860).

"Forward!" shouted Cyrus Harding, who understood that the dispatch had not been sent from the corral but rather from the mysterious retreat, using a supplementary wire attached to the old wire that communicated directly with Granite House.

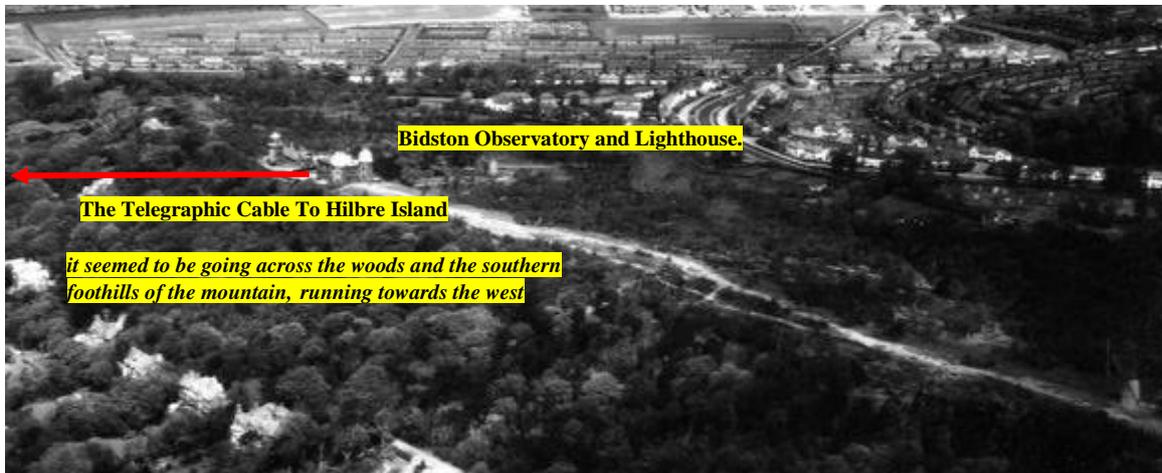
Neb took the lighted lantern, and they all left the Corral.

The storm was approaching with extreme fury. The interval which separated each flash of lightning and each clap of thunder rapidly diminished. Before long, the gale would encompass Mount Franklin and the entire island. During the intermittent flashes, they could see the summit of the volcano with its plume of smoke.

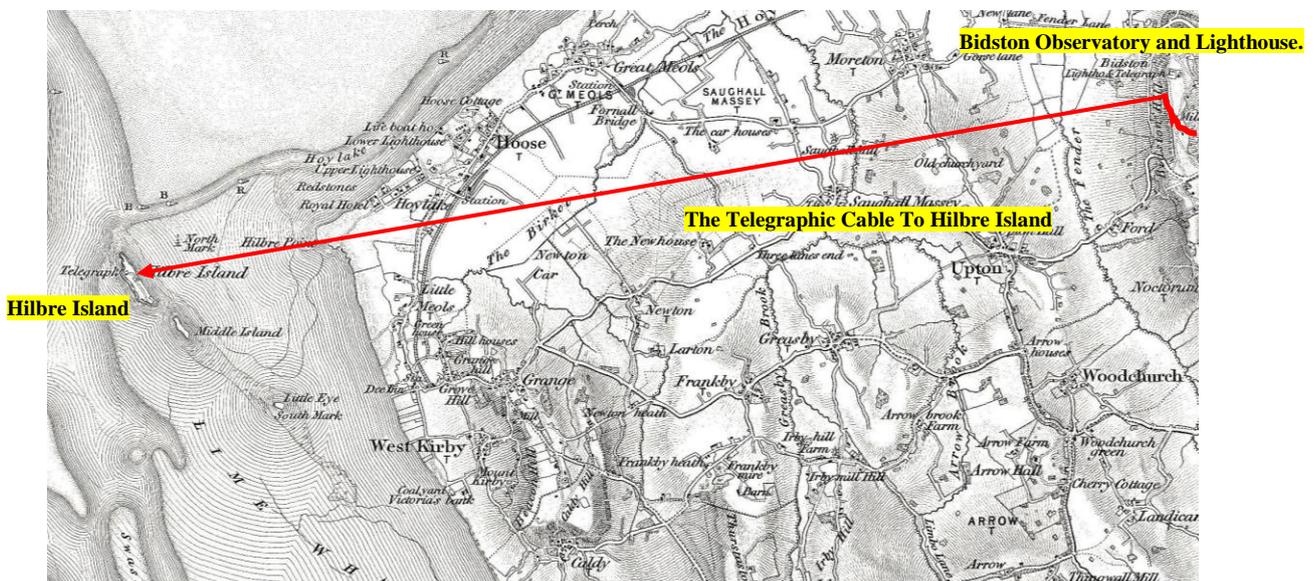
There were no telegraph poles in any part of the corral which separated the house from the stockade wall. But upon leaving the house, the engineer, going straight to the nearest post, saw by the light of a flash that a new wire went from the insulator to the ground.

"There it is!" he said.

This wire stretched out on the ground, and, along its entire length, it was surrounded with an insulating material as is done with submarine cables to assure the unobstructed transmission of the current. From its direction, it seemed to be going across the woods and the southern foothills of the mountain, running towards the west.



Across the woods and the southern foothills of the mountain, running towards the west



The Line of the new cable from Bidston Observatory to Hilbre Island – Captain Nemo’s Cable.

“Let’s follow it!” said Cyrus Harding.

And by the glow from the lantern and the flashes of lightning, the colonists rushed along the route traced out by the wire.

The thunder was then continuous, and its roar was such that no word could be heard. But there was no need to speak; they used all their strength to continue moving forward.

But there was no longer any doubt that this wire was running directly to the sea.

There, doubtless, in the depths of these igneous rocks, was the hollowed out dwelling which they had, until then, searched for in vain.

The sky was on fire, with one flash of lightning after another. Some struck the top of the volcano, crashing into the crater amidst the thick fumes. At times it was as if the mountaintop was spewing out flames.

The Corral, the Mountain and the volcano are of course, one and the same – Bidston Hill and Bidston Lighthouse. Bidston Lighthouse, the most powerful lighthouse beam in the world *spewing out flames.*

In 1873 the Hilbre telegraph Station was one of eleven stations on the Liverpool to Holyhead telegraph cable route.

The telegraph gave rapid warning of ships approaching the Port of Liverpool.



The line of the cable to Hilbre Island.

The telegraph consisted of an overhead wire suspended between posts running towards Hoylake, here, it disappeared beneath the sands of the river Dee before emerging at Hilbre Island. Hence Jules Verne stating that....

But there was no longer any doubt that this wire was running directly to the sea

Jules Verne misses out the tidal channel between Hilbre Island and Hoylake and so on his *Mysterious Island* the new telegraphic wire laid by Captain Nemo is still on the mainland.



Map of the 1861 Cable



The telegraphic cable comes ashore at Hilbre Island.

The 1861 cable (Captain Nemo's cable) can still be seen on Hilbre Island today, making its way towards the telegraph station and down the steep cliffs just beyond (see below).



Aerial View of Hilbre Island showing the line of the Liverpool to Holyhead cable.

A few minutes before eleven o'clock, the colonists arrived at the high bluff which overlooked the ocean to the west. The wind had risen, and the surf roared 500 feet below.



The Cliffs (the *high bluff*) on the Western Side of Hilbre Island.

The cliffs on the west side of Hilbre are fifty feet high, Jules Verne is adding a zero to their 50-foot height for dramatic effect. Verne gave the same tenfold vertical exaggeration to both the height of Bidston Hill and the height of the water level in Lake Grant above sea level.

At this point, the wire went in among the rocks, following the steep slope of a narrow and irregularly shaped ravine.

The colonists ventured in, risking a landslide from the poorly balanced rocks and being dashed into the sea. The descent was extremely perilous, but they were not concerned with the danger. They were no longer masters of themselves, and an irresistible attraction drew them toward this mysterious point, like a magnet attracts iron.

Almost unconsciously, they descended this ravine which, even in full daylight, would have been very nearly impassable. The stones rolled and glistened like fiery balls as they crossed through the gleams of light. Cyrus Harding was at the head. Ayrton was at the rear. On they went, step by step, sometimes slipping on a smooth rock, then getting up and continuing on their way.

Finally, the wire, turned a sharp corner, reached the rocks on shore, a veritable seedbed of broken reefs, battered by the high tides. The colonists had arrived at the lower limit of the basaltic wall.

There they found a narrow shelf which ran parallel to the sea. The wire led along it, and the colonists followed. They had not gone a hundred feet when the shelf, sloping down, reached the very level of the waves.

The engineer seized the wire, and he saw that it ran into the sea. His companions, stopping near him, were stupefied.

A cry of disappointment, nearly a cry of desperation, escaped from them! Must they then throw themselves under the waves to find some submarine cavern there? In the agitated moral and physical state that they were in, they would not have hesitated to do so!

A thought from the engineer stopped them.

Cyrus Harding led his companions to one of the hollows among the rocks:

“Let’s wait,” he said. “The tide’s high. At low tide, the pathway will open up.”

“But what makes you think? ...” asked Pencroft.

“He would not have called for us if there were no means for getting to him.”

Cyrus Harding spoke with such conviction that no objection was raised and, moreover, his observation made sense. They had to admit to the possibility that an opening, passable at low tide but covered by the waves at the moment, might indeed exist at the foot of the wall.

There were a few hours to wait. The colonists remained crouched and silent under a sort of deep porch cut into the rock. The rain then began to fall which soon became torrents condensed from the clouds and wrenched loose by thunderbolts. The echoes repeated the roar of thunder in sonorous reverberations.

The emotions of the colonists were extreme. A thousand strange and supernatural thoughts crossed their minds, and they could only imagine some grand and superhuman apparition which corresponded to the image that they had formed of the mysterious genie of the island.

At midnight Cyrus Harding, carrying the lantern, descended to beach level in order to observe the rocks. It was already two hours into low tide.

The engineer had not been mistaken.

The arch of a vast excavation began to appear above the water. The wire, bending at a right angle went into its gaping mouth.

The arch of a vast excavation began to appear – Lady’s Cave on the western side of Hilbre Island.



Cyrus Harding returned to his companions and said simply:

“In an hour the opening will be accessible.”

“It exists then?” asked Pencroft.

“Did you doubt it?” replied Cyrus Harding.

“But this cavern will be partially filled with water,” noted Herbert.

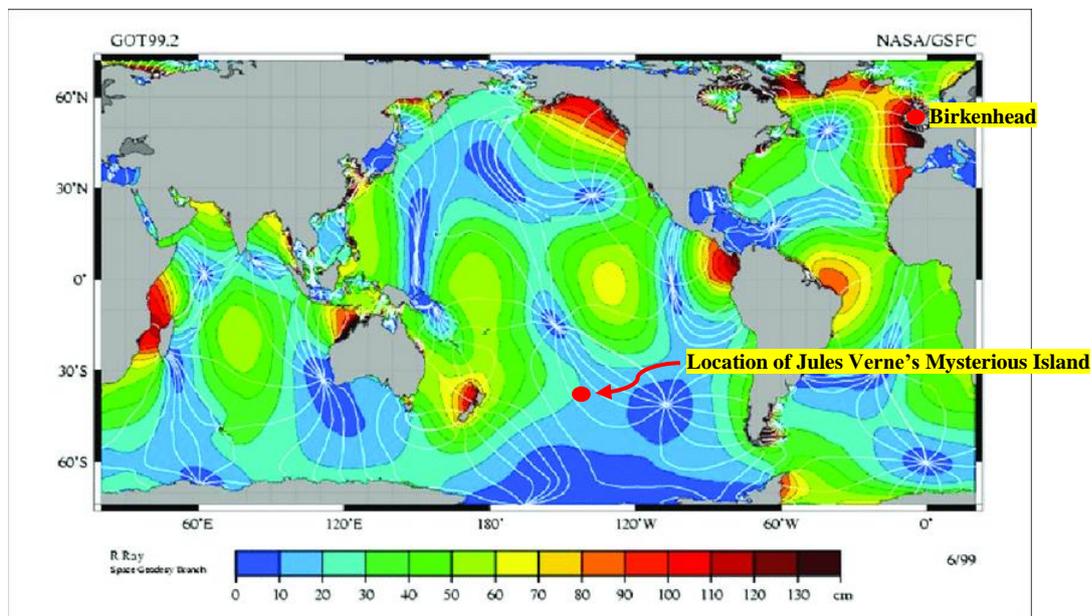
“Either the cavern will be completely dry,” answered Cyrus Harding, “and in that case we’ll proceed on foot; or it won’t be dry, and some means of transportation will be provided to us.”

An hour passed. Everyone descended in the rain to the level of the sea. **In three hours, the sea had dropped fifteen feet.** The top of the arch was now at least eight feet high. It was like the arch of a bridge beneath which the foamy water flowed.

This is Jules Verne’s greatest clue as to the actual setting of his *Mysterious Island*. At Hilbre Island it takes six hours for the highest tide to fall thirty feet to the lowest tide level – it therefore takes three hours to fall fifteen feet.

In contrast the South Pacific has virtually no tides and at the supposed location of Mysterious Island, 35 degrees south and 150 degrees west, the water would only fall four inches in three hours.

Worldwide there are very few such areas with a tidal range of over 30 feet, these are coloured dark brown on the map below.



A World Map of Tidal Range (centimetres).

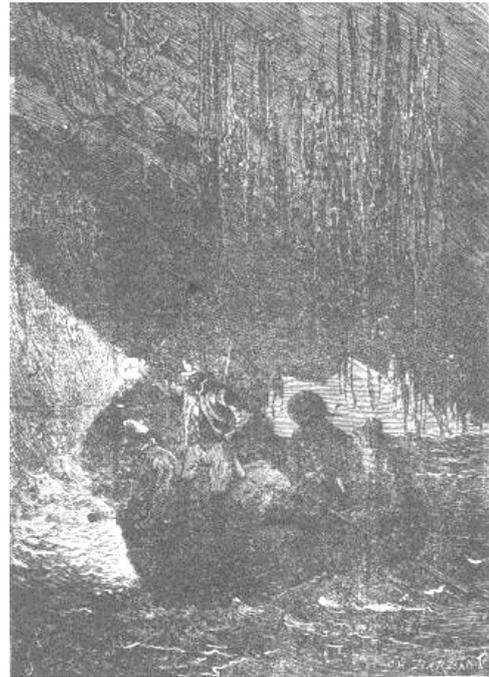
Leaning over, the engineer saw a black object floating on the surface of the sea. He drew it toward him.

It was a rowboat, moored by a rope to some interior projection of the wall. The boat was made of riveted sheet iron. The oars were lying in its bottom, under the seats.

“Let’s get aboard,” said Cyrus Harding.

A moment later, the colonists were in the boat. Neb and Ayrton took the oars, with Pencroft at the rudder. Cyrus Harding was at the bow with the lantern, lighting the way.

The ceiling of the arch, very low when the boat passed under it, then rose sharply. But darkness surrounded them, and the light from the lantern was insufficient for them to recognize the extent of the cavern, its length, its height, or its depth. In the midst of this basaltic substructure, there reigned an imposing silence. No sound from the outside could penetrate here, and the flashes of lightning could not pierce its thick walls.



Harding stood at the bow.

The ceiling of the arch, very low when the boat passed under it, then rose sharply. But darkness surrounded them, and the light from the lantern was insufficient for them to recognize the extent of the cavern, its length, its height, or its depth. In the midst of this basaltic substructure, there reigned an imposing silence. No sound from the outside could penetrate here, and the flashes of lightning could not pierce its thick walls.

In Jules Verne’s world, the colonists seem to have now shrunk to ‘Lilliputian’ size to enter the Lady’s Cave on Hilbre Island which is no more than fifteen feet deep and about forty feet across. Verne is perhaps gaining inspiration from another author – Jonathan Swift and his *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).

Jules Verne now drives home the fact that we are indeed in a singularly spectacular and awe-inspiring cavern of enormous scale, rather than just a small cave seven miles from Birkenhead.

These immense caverns exist in several parts of the world. They are natural crypts which date from geological times. Some are invaded by the waters of the sea; others contain entire lakes within their walls.

Such is Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa, one of the Hebrides;



such are the caves of Morgot, on the bay of Douarnenez in Brittany;



the caves of Bonafacio in Corsica;



those of Lyse-Fjord in Norway;



and such is the immense cavern of Mammoth Kentucky, 500 feet high and more than 20 miles long.



At several points of the globe, nature has hollowed out these crypts and preserved them for the admiration of man.



The somewhat less inspiring backwall to the Lady's Cave on Hilbre Island.

Did this cavern extend to the very centre of the island? For a quarter of an hour the boat advanced, making such detours as the engineer briefly indicated to Pencroft.

"More to the right," he commanded.

The boat, changing its direction, soon approached the right wall. The engineer wanted to determine if the wire was still running along the wall.

The wire was still there, fastened to the outcroppings of rock.

"Forward!" said Cyrus Harding.

The two oars plunged into the dark waters, propelling the boat ahead.

The boat advanced for another quarter of an hour, and they must have crossed a distance of half a mile from the cavern's opening when Cyrus Harding's voice was heard anew.

"Stop!" he said.

The boat stopped, and the colonists saw a vivid light which illuminated this enormous crypt hollowed out deep in the bowels of the island.

It was then possible to examine this cavern whose existence they had never suspected.

An immense vault rose to the height of a hundred feet, supported by basalt columns which seemed to have been cast from the same mold. Irregular arches and ogival ribs sprung from thousands of columns which Nature had erected during the first eras of the earth's formation.

These basaltic pillars, crowded close to one another, measured forty to fifty feet in height, and the water, calm in spite of tumult outside, quietly lapped at their base. The bright light seemed to infuse each prismatic outcropping of rock with fire, penetrating the walls as if they were transparent, and changing the smallest projections into brilliant gemstones.

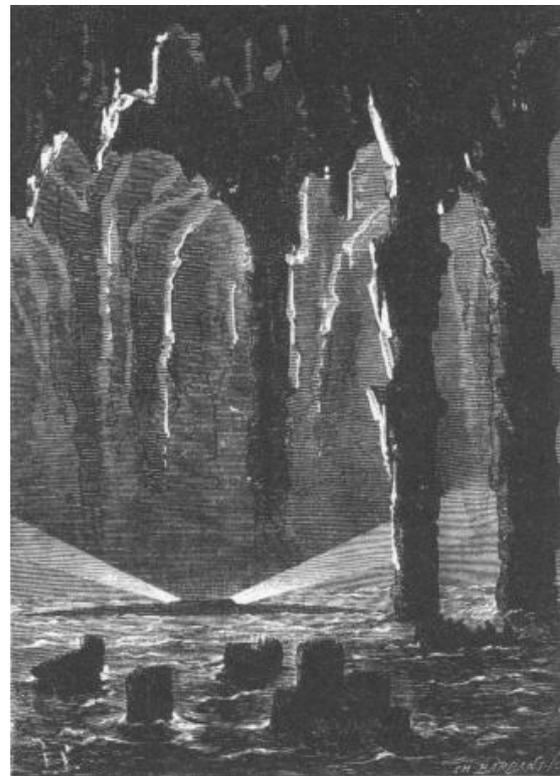
The water reflected these various patterns of light on its surface, and the boat seemed to float between two zones of sparkling radiance.

There was no doubt about the nature of the light emanating from this central source whose straight, clear rays illuminated all corners and angles of the crypt. This light came from electricity, and its white colour betrayed its origin. It was the sun of this cavern and filled it entirely.

On a sign from Cyrus Harding, the oars were plunged again into the water, producing a veritable shower of jewels, and the boat slowly glided toward the source of luminous energy. Soon they were less than a half a cable-length from it.

At this point, the sheet of water measured about 350 feet across. They could see, beyond the brilliance, an enormous basaltic wall which blocked any exit from that side. Here, the cavern widened considerably, and the sea formed a small lake. But the vault above, the lateral walls, the rising cliff beyond, all these prisms, cylinders, and cones were bathed in an electrical fluid and glowed with a radiance that seemed to emanate from them. Like the facets of expensive diamonds, they seemed to ooze with light.

At the centre of the lake, a long fusiform object floated on the surface of the water, silent and still. The light escaped from its sides like two openings from a blast furnace that had been heated to a white heat. This object, which looked like the body of an enormous whale, was about 250 feet long and rose from ten to twelve feet above the level of the sea.



A long fusiform object floated on the surface.

The boat approached it slowly. In the bow stood Cyrus Harding who examined it with growing excitement. Then he suddenly seized the reporter's arms.

“But it is he! It can only be he!” he exclaimed. “He!...”

Then he fell back onto his seat, murmuring a name that only Gideon Spilett heard.

Doubtless the reporter recognised this name because it had a powerful effect on him, and he answered in a muted voice:

“He! An outlawed man!”

“He!” said Cyrus Harding.

On the engineer’s order, the boat approached this strange floating apparatus. The boat came alongside the left quarter from which a beam of light escaped through a thick glass.

Cyrus Harding and his companions climbed onto the deck. An open hatchway was there, and they all hurried down into it.

At the base of the ladder, there was an interior gangway lighted by electricity. At the end of this gangway Cyrus Harding pushed open a door.

The colonists entered a richly ornamented room which led into a library with a ceiling that poured out a torrent of light.

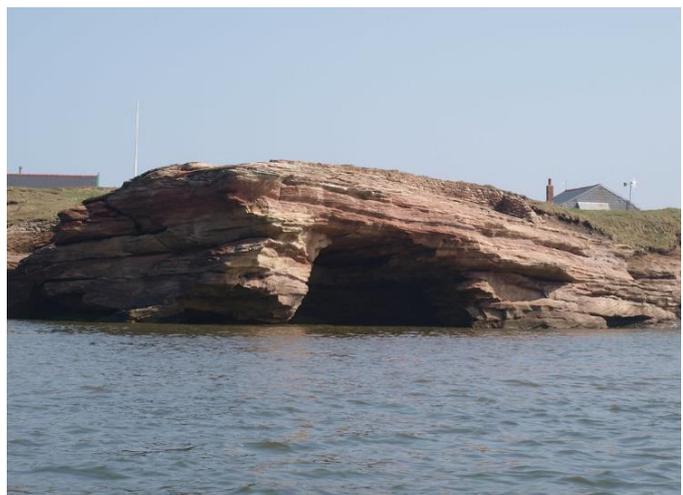
At the rear of the library there was a large door, also closed. The engineer opened it.

Before the colonists’ eyes a vast salon suddenly appeared – a kind of museum crowded with all the mineral treasures of nature, works of art, and the marvels of industry – and they almost believed that they had been magically transported into a dream world.

They saw a man lying on a rich sofa who did not seem to be aware of their presence.

Then Cyrus Harding spoke, and to the extreme surprise of his companions, he pronounced these words:

“Captain Nemo, you have summoned us. We are here.”



The Lady’s Cave, Hilbre Island. The home of Captain Nemo and his *Nautilus*.

Captain Nemo, we are here.

Next on Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

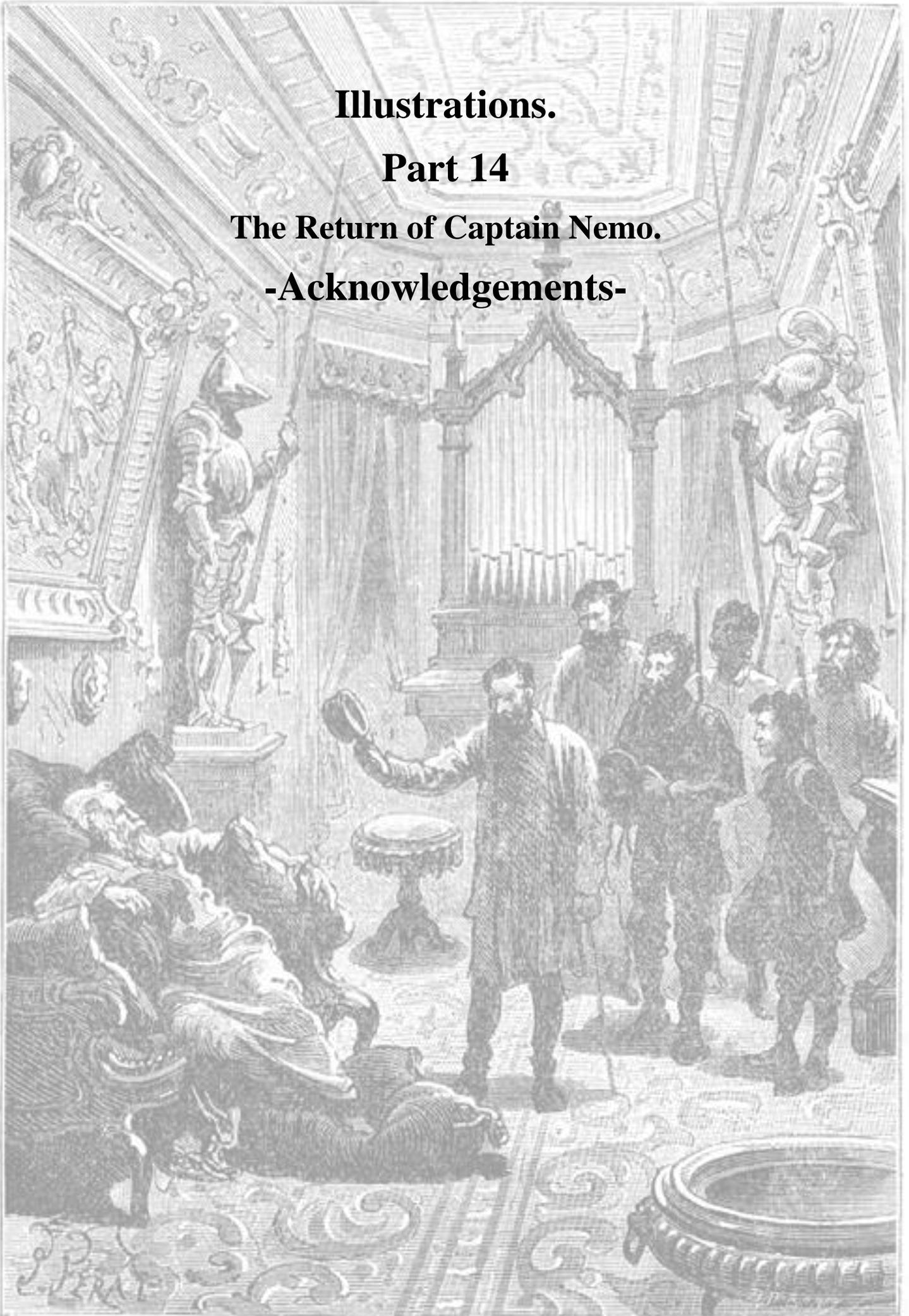
15. Captain Nemo – The Story of My Life.

Illustrations.

Part 14

The Return of Captain Nemo.

-Acknowledgements-



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