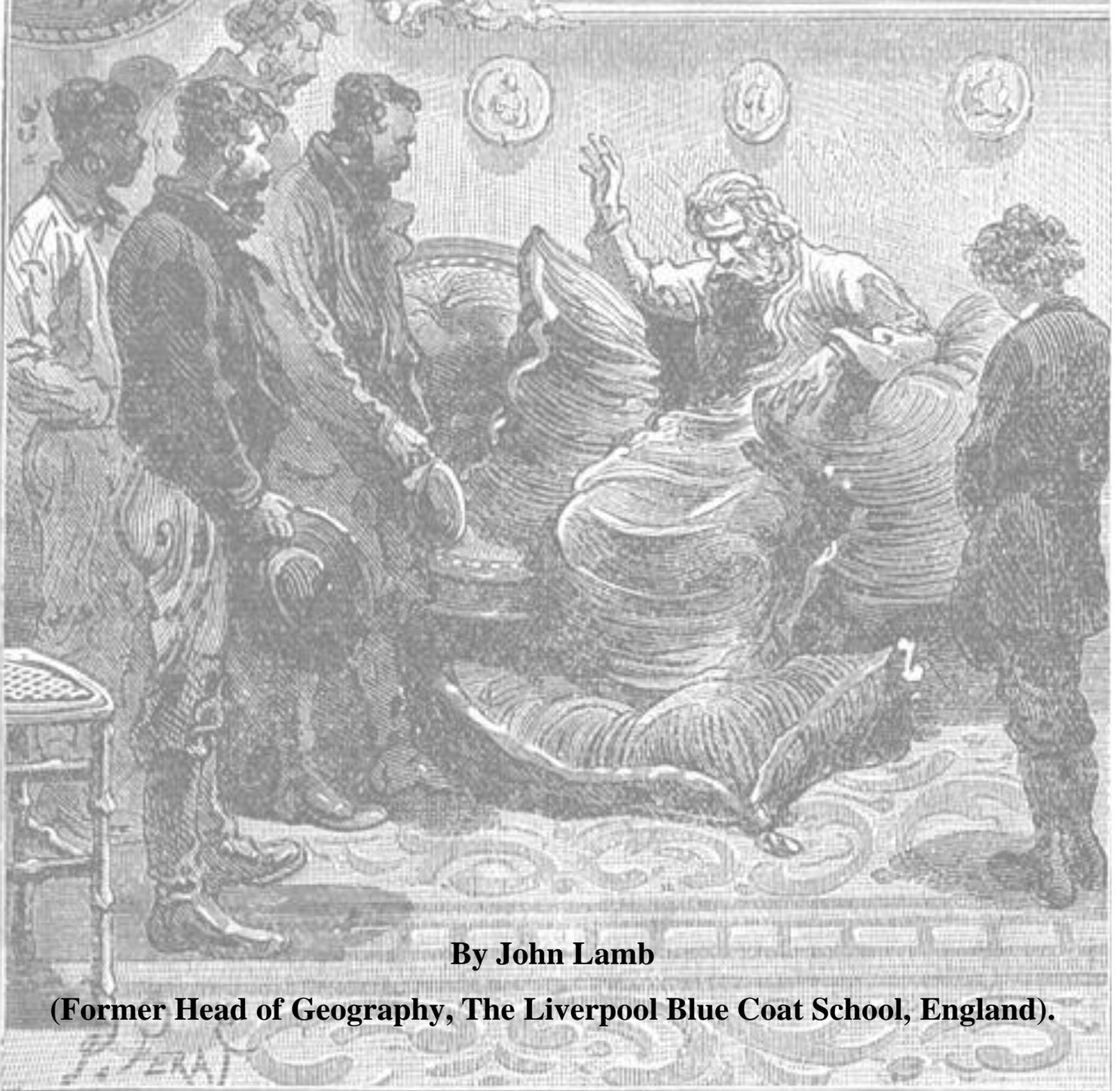




Jules Verne and The Heroes of Birkenhead.

Part 15.

Captain Nemo – The Story of My Life.



By John Lamb

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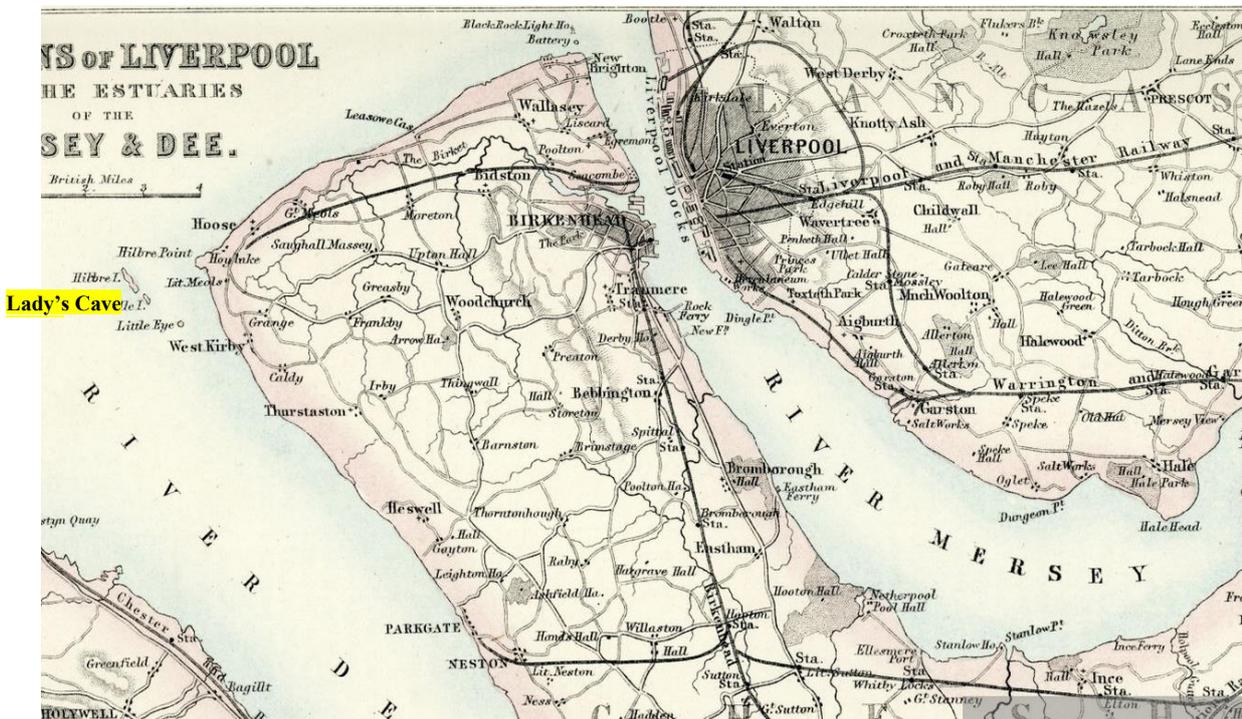
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– THE LIFE OF CAPTAIN NEMO –

The Wirral Locations Used in Part 15



Captain Nemo – the Story of my Life.



At these words, the reclining man raised himself up, and his face appeared in the full light: a magnificent head, high forehead, fiery eyes, white beard, and long hair flowing on to his shoulders.

This man steadied himself with his hand on the back of the sofa from which he had just risen. He appeared perfectly calm. One could see that some lingering illness had weakened him, but his voice still seemed strong when he said in English and in a surprised tone:

“I have no name, sir!”

Captain Nemo, we are here.

“I know you,” answered Cyrus Harding.

Captain Nemo gave the engineer a searing look as if he had wished to annihilate him.

Then he fell back on the cushions of his sofa.

“After all, it doesn’t matter,” he murmured. “I will soon be dead!”

Cyrus Harding approached Captain Nemo, and Gideon Spilett took his hand which he found to be burning. Ayrton, Pencroft, Herbert, and Neb respectfully stood to one side in a corner of this magnificent salon whose air was flooded with electrical light.

Captain Nemo immediately withdrew his hand, and he motioned the engineer and the reporter to be seated.

Everyone looked at him with profound emotion. Here was the person they called the “genie of the island,” the powerful being whose intervention in so many circumstances had been so effective, this benefactor to whom they were so much indebted! Before their eyes, they beheld only a man, where Pencroft and Neb thought they would find almost a god, and this man was near death.

But how was it that Cyrus Harding knew Captain Nemo? Why had the latter stood up so abruptly upon hearing this name which he believed known to no one?....

The captain resumed his place on the sofa and, leaning on its arm, he looked at the engineer seated next to him.

“You know the name which I carried,” sir? He asked.

“I know it” replied Cyrus Harding, “just as I know the name of this admirable submarine apparatus.”

“The Nautilus?” said the Captain, half smiling.

“The Nautilus.”

“But do you know Do you know who I am?”

“I do.”

“Nevertheless, it’s been thirty years since I’ve had any communication with the inhabited world, thirty years during which I have lived in the depths of the sea, the only place where I have found independence! Who then could have betrayed my secret?”

“A man who never pledged loyalty to you, Captain Nemo, and who consequently cannot be accused of treason.”

“The Frenchman who was cast by chance on board my vessel sixteen years ago?”

“The same.”

“Then this man and his companions didn’t perish in the maelstrom in which the Nautilus was trapped?”

“They didn’t perish, and a book appeared under the title of Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas which contains your story.”

“The story of a few months only, sir!” the captain quickly replied.

“That’s true!” Agreed Cyrus Harding, “but several months of this strange life have sufficed to make you known...?”

“As a great criminal, no doubt?” answered Captain Nemo, with a disdainful smile. “Yes, a rebel, perhaps outlawed by humanity!”

The engineer did not reply.

“Well, sir?”

“It is not for me to pass judgement on Captain Nemo,” continued Cyrus Harding, “at least as it concerns his past life. I’m ignorant, as is the entire world, of what motivated his strange existence, and I can’t judge the effects without knowing the causes. But this much I know, that a helping hand has always been extended to us since our arrival on Lincoln Island. We all owe our lives to a good, generous, and powerful being, and this powerful, generous, good being is you, Captain Nemo!”

The captain simply replied, “It is I.”

The engineer and the reporter got up. Their companions had drawn near, and the gratitude which overflowed from their hearts was about to be expressed by gestures, by words ...

But captain Nemo stopped them with a motion in his hand. And, with a voice doubtless more emotional than he had intended:

“Wait until you have heard me,” he said.

And the captain, in a few concise sentences, made his entire life known to them.



His story was brief, yet he had come to concentrate all his remaining energy to finish it. It was obvious that he was struggling against extreme weakness. Several times Cyrus Harding urged him to rest, but he shook his head like a man who has no tomorrow. And when the reporter offered him some medical assistance.

“It’s useless,” he said, “my hours are numbered.”

“Wait until you have heard me,” he said.

Captain Nemo was an Indian, Prince Dakkar, son of a rajah of the then-independent territory of Bundelkund and nephew of the Indian hero, Tippo Saib. His father sent him to Europe when he was ten years old so that he could receive a complete education, but with the secret intention that he might fight on equal terms one day against those who he considered to be the oppressors of his country.

From the age of ten to thirty, Prince Dakkar, a gifted student of noble heart and strong spirit, instructed himself in all things, and in the sciences, letters, and the arts, his studies were both profound and far reaching.

Prince Dakkar travelled throughout Europe. His noble birth and his fortune made his company much sought after, but the temptations of the world never had any attraction for him. Young and handsome, he remained serious, gloomy, ravenous in his thirst for knowledge, and with an implacable anger fixed in his heart.

Prince Dakkar hated. He hated the only country where he never wished to set foot, the only nation whose overtures he constantly refused: he hated England, and all the more so because, in some ways, he admired her.

This Indian man summed up his own person all the fierce hatred of the vanquished against the conquerors. The invader could expect no sympathy from the invaded. The son of one of those sovereigns from whom the United Kingdom could force only nominal obedience, this prince from the family of Tippo Saib, raised on the ideas of vindication and vengeance and having powerful love for his idyllic country now burdened by British chains, never wanted to set foot on this cursed land to which India owed its enslavement.

Prince Dakkar became an artist with a noble appreciation of the marvels of art, a scientist who was no stranger to the most advanced sciences, a statesman trained in the many courts of Europe. To those who observed him superficially, he perhaps seemed like one of those cosmopolitans, curious about knowledge but disdainful of its use, one of those opulent travelers with a fiery and platonic spirit who move about the world incessantly but who call no country home.

This was not the case. The artist, this scientist, this man had remained Indian to the heart, Indian by his desire for vengeance, Indian by his hope of one day reclaiming the rights of his country by driving out the foreigner and restoring its independence.

Consequently, Prince Dakkar returned to Bundelkand in the year 1849. He married a noble Indian woman whose heart bled as his did at her country's misfortunes. He had two children whom he cherished. But his domestic happiness could not make him forget India's enslavement. He waited for an opportunity. It soon came.

The British yoke had weighed perhaps too heavily on the Hindu population. Prince Dakkar became the spokesman for the malcontents. He instilled in them all the hatred he had for the foreigners. He travelled not only to the still independent areas on the Indian Peninsula but also to those regions directly subject to British administration. He recalled the great days of Tippo Saib who had died heroically at Seringapatam in the defence of the country.

In 1857, the great Sepoy revolt broke out. Prince Dakkar was its soul. He organized the immense uprising, and he devoted both his talents and his wealth to this cause. He sacrificed himself. He fought in the front lines; he risked his life like the humblest of those heroes who had risen up to free their country; he was wounded ten times in twenty encounters but could not find death when the last soldiers of the fight for independence fell under British bullets.

Never had British rule in India been in such danger. If the Sepoys had received the outside help which they hoped for, the United Kingdom's influence over and domination of Asia would have perhaps ended.

The name of Prince Dakkar was then illustrious. The heroes who supported him did not hide but fought openly. A price was put on his head, and, although he was not betrayed by any traitor in his midst, his father, mother, wife and children paid the ultimate price before he realized the danger he had put them in.

This time again, might made right. But civilization never goes backward, and her laws are made from necessity. The Sepoys were vanquished, and the land of the ancient rajahs again fell under the even harsher domination of England.

Prince Dakkar, who could not find death, returned to the mountains of Bundelkund. There, henceforth alone, he was filled with disgust against all who carried the name of man; he felt a hatred and a horror of the civilized world and wanted to flee from it forever. He collected the remains of his fortune, gathered together twenty of his most trustworthy companions, and one day disappeared.

Where then had Prince Dakkar gone to find the independence which the inhabited world refused him? Under the water, in the depths of the sea, where no one could follow him.

The man of war became a scientist. On a desert island in the Pacific, he built a shipyard and there a submarine vessel was constructed based on his plans. By means which will one day be known, he used the incomparable force of electricity, which he drew from inexhaustible sources, for all the necessities of his vessel, for movement, lighting, and heating. The sea, with its infinite treasures, its myriads of fish, its harvest of seaweed and sargassum, its enormous mammals, and not only everything put there by Nature but also everything that mankind had lost there, would amply fulfill the needs of the prince and his crew. And thus he accomplished his heart's desire, no longer wishing to have any communication with the earth. He named his submarine ship the Nautilus, he called himself Captain Nemo, and he disappeared beneath the seas.

For many years, the captain visited all the oceans from one pole to the other. An outcast from the inhabited world, he gathered up admirable treasures from the unknown world. The millions lost in Vigo Bay in 1702 by the Spanish galleons furnished him with an inexhaustible mine of riches which he always gave, anonymously, to those people who fought for the independence of their country.

He had been, for a long time, out of contact with his fellow beings when, during the night of the 6th November 1866, three men were thrown upon his deck. They were a French professor, his servant, and a Canadian fisherman. These three men had been cast into the sea during a collision between the Nautilus and the United States frigate, the Abraham Lincoln, which had been pursuing it.

Captain Nemo learned from the professor that the Nautilus, sometimes mistaken for a giant mammal of the cetacean family, sometimes for a submarine apparatus containing a crew of pirates, was being hunted in every sea.

Captain Nemo could have thrown back into the ocean these three men that chance had thrust into the path of his mysterious existence. But, instead, he kept them as prisoners and, for several months, they were able to contemplate all the marvels of a voyage which covered twenty thousand leagues under the seas.

One day, June 22nd, 1867, these three men, who knew nothing of Captain Nemo's past, seized the Nautilus's dinghy and escaped. But since, at that moment, the Nautilus was trapped in a whirling maelstrom off the Norwegian coast, the captain assumed that the fugitives had drowned in a frightful vortex, finding death at the bottom of the whirlpool. He was unaware that the Frenchman and his two companions had been miraculously thrown upon the coast, that fishermen from the Lofoten Islands had saved them, and that the professor, on his return to France, had published a book in which the strange and adventurous seven-month journey aboard the Nautilus was narrated and offered to a curious public.

Captain Nemo still continued to live this way, cruising beneath the seas, for many years. But, one after another, his companions died and went to their rest in the coral cemetery at the bottom of the Pacific. The Nautilus became empty, and finally Captain Nemo alone remained of all those who had taken refuge with him in the depths of the ocean.

Captain Nemo was then sixty years old. Alone, he managed to bring his Nautilus to one of the submarine ports which served him in former days as a safe harbour. One such port was hollowed out under Lincoln Island, and this one now provided refuge for the Nautilus.

For six years the captain remained there, no longer navigating, awaiting death and the moment when he would be reunited with his companions. Then, by chance, he witnessed the fall of the balloon carrying the prisoners of the Confederates. Wearing his diving suit, he was walking under the water a few cable lengths from shore when the engineer was thrown into the sea. Moved by a sudden feeling of compassion, the captain saved Cyrus Harding's life.

At first he wanted to run from these five castaways, but his port of refuge was closed: as a consequence of the volcanic action, the cavern's basalt rock had moved, and he could no longer pass through the entrance to the crypt. There was still enough water for a small boat to pass, but no longer enough for the Nautilus which was a vessel of considerable draught.

Captain Nemo therefore remained to observe these men, cast without resources on a desert island, but he did not wish to be seen. Little by little, as he discovered their honesty, energy, and their fraternal devotion to one another, he became interested in their efforts. In spite of himself, he learned all the secrets of their existence. By means of the diving suit it was easy for him to reach the bottom of the inside well of Granite House and climb up to the upper opening, using the projections of the rock. He overheard the colonists relating their past and discussing the present and the future. From them he learned of the immense effort to abolish slavery with American fighting American. Yes! These were men worthy of reconciling Captain Nemo with the humanity that they so honestly represented on the island.

Captain Nemo had saved Cyrus Harding. It was also he who brought the dog to the Chimneys, who threw Top out of the waters of the lake, who left at Flotsam Point this chest which contained so many things useful to the colonists, who put the canoe back into the Mercy's current, who threw down the cord from the top of Granite House when the apes attacked it, who made Ayrton's presence on Tabor Island known by means of the document contained in the bottle, who capsized the brig with the explosion of the torpedo placed at the bottom of the channel, who saved Herbert from certain death by bringing the sulphate of quinine, and finally who killed the convicts with these secret electrical bullets which he used for submarine hunting. This then explained these many incidents which seemed supernatural, and all attested to the generosity and power of the captain.

However, the noble misanthrope still yearned to do good. There remained some useful information for him to impart to his proteges and, with death approaching, he yielded to the dictates of his heart and summoned the colonists of Granite House by means of the wire linking the corral to the Nautilus which was itself equipped with a telegraphic apparatus. Perhaps he would not have done so if he had known that Cyrus Harding knew enough of his history to address him by the name of Nemo.

The captain ended the story of his life. Cyrus Harding then spoke; he recalled all the incidents which had exerted such beneficial influences on the colony and, on behalf of his companions as well as himself, he thanked the generous being to whom they owed so much.

But captain Nemo had no thought of putting a price on the services which he had rendered. One last thought was on his mind and, before shaking the hand that the engineer offered him:

"Now, sir," he said, "now that you know my life, what is your judgement?"

In so speaking, the captain evidently alluded to a tragic incident which had been witnessed by the three strangers on board – an incident which the French professor had necessarily related in his book and which no doubt had caused a terrible sensation.

In fact, a few days before the professor and his two companions escaped, the Nautilus, pursued by a frigate in the North Atlantic, had rushed upon her like a battering ram and sunk her without mercy.

Cyrus Harding understood the allusion and remained silent.

“It was a British frigate, sir,” Captain Nemo exclaimed, becoming again Prince Dakkar for a moment, “a British frigate, do you hear me?”

It attacked me! I was restricted to a narrow shallow bay ... I had to pass ...I passed.”

Then in a calmer voice:

“I had justice and right on my side,” he added. “I always did good when I could and did evil when I had to. All justice is not in forgiveness.”

A few moments of silence followed this response and Captain Nemo again asked:

“What do you think of me, gentlemen?”

Cyrus Harding held out his hand to the captain and, as requested, he replied in a solemn voice:

“Captain, your error was in believing that you could bring back the past, and you have fought against progress, which is ineluctable. It was one of those errors that some admire and others blame, but which God alone can judge and which human reason must forgive. We may fight against someone who makes a mistake for a cause he believes to be just, but we do not cease to esteem him. Your error is not one that excludes such admiration, and your name has nothing to fear from the judgement of history. History loves heroic madness, while condemning the consequences that result from it.”

Captain Nemo’s chest heaved and he pointed to heaven.

“Was I wrong, was I right?” he murmured.

Cyrus Harding replied:

“All great deeds return to God from whence they came! The honest men here, those whom you have saved, shall always mourn you, Captain Nemo!”

Herbert drew near to the captain. kneeling down, he took his hand and kissed it.

A tear glistened from the eyes of the dying man.

My child,” he said, “bless you!...” Nemo’s blessing for Herbert will be significant.

Next on Jules Verne and the Heroes of Birkenhead.

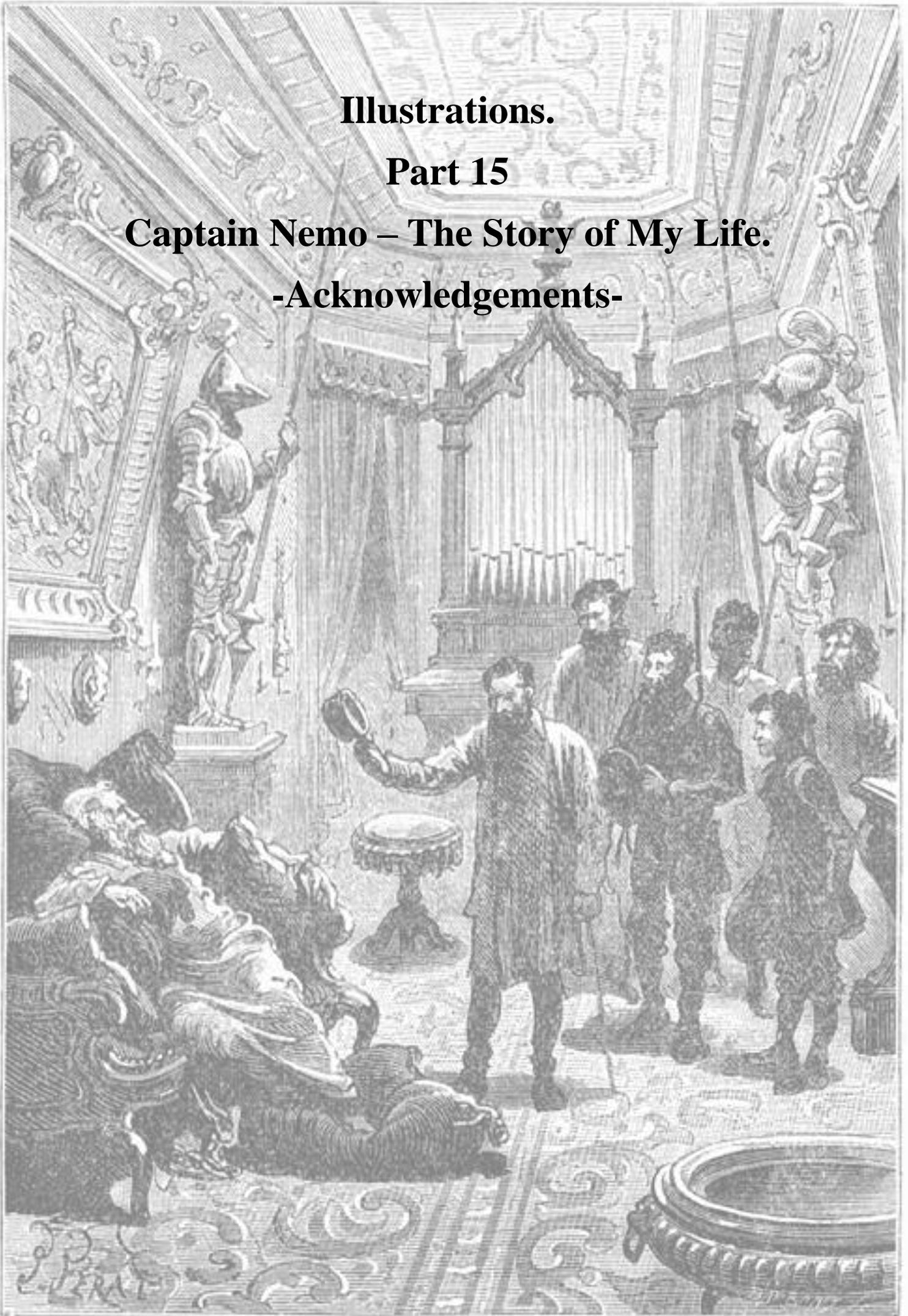
16. The Death of Captain Nemo.

Illustrations.

Part 15

Captain Nemo – The Story of My Life.

-Acknowledgements-



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