

THE BLACK-INDIES!

By JULES VERNE.

CHAPTER IX.

(Continued.)

They did not speak, but it was not for want of thinking. It was evident that they had an enemy.

But who was it? And how defend themselves against attacks so mysteriously prepared? These ideas, unpleasant enough, crowded to their brains. But this was not the time to get discouraged.

Harry, his arms extended, advanced with a firm step. He went in turn from one side to the other of the gallery. A fissure, a side orifice would be presented. He knew by touch that he must not enter it, the fissure was too shallow, the orifice too narrow, and he thus kept in the right road.

In a darkness in which the eyes were useless, because it was absolute, the difficult return lasted about two hours. In computing the time that had elapsed, making allowance for the fact that they had walked very slowly, James Starr concluded that he and his companions were very near the issue.

In fact, very soon Harry stopped. "Have we at last reached the end of the gallery?" asked Simon Ford.

"Yes," replied the young miner.

"Well, then, you ought to find the opening that communicates between the New Aberfoyle and the Dochart Pit."

"No," said Harry, whose hands had encountered only the plain surface of a wall.

The old overseer took several steps forward, and felt the schistous rock.

A cry escaped him.

Either the explorers had wandered off in their return, or the narrow orifice, broken in the wall by the dynamite, had been recently closed.

However it might be, James Starr and his companions were imprisoned in New Aberfoyle.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRE-LADIES.

Eight days after these events, James Starr's friends were very anxious about him. The engineer had disappeared, while no motive could be assigned for his disappearance. They had learned, by questioning his servant, that he had embarked at Granton Pier, and they knew from the captain of the steamboat, "Prince of Wales," that he had gone ashore at Stirling; but from that moment, no trace of James Starr. Simon Ford's letter had requested secrecy, and he had said nothing of his departure for the Aberfoyle mines. Thus, at Edinburgh, nothing was talked about but the inexplicable absence of the engineer. Sir W. Elphinstone, the president of the Royal Institute, showed to his colleagues the letter which had been addressed to him by James Starr, excusing himself from the next meeting of the society. Two or three other persons produced similar letters, but, if these documents proved that James Starr had left Edinburgh, what more did they know? Nothing indicated what had become of him. Now, on the part of such a man, this absence, so different from his usual habits, first caused surprise, then anxiety, because it was prolonged.

None of the engineer's friends would have supposed that he had gone to the Aberfoyle mines. They knew that he did not like to see the old scene of his labors. He had never revisited it since the day when the last lump of coal was drawn to the surface of the soil. Meanwhile, as the steamboat had left him at the landing-place at Stirling, they sought for him in that neighborhood.

They inquired in vain. No one remembered having seen the engineer in the county. Jack Ryan alone, who had met him in Harry's company on one of the pillars of the Yarrow shaft, could have satisfied public curiosity; but the merry fellow we know, was working at Melrose Farm, forty miles off in the southwest of Renfrew, and he little suspected that there was any anxiety over the disappearance of James Starr. Thus, eight days after his visit to the cottage, Jack Ryan might have continued to sing his best in the gatherings of the Clan Irvin, if he himself had not some great trouble, which will soon be mentioned.

James Starr was a man of too much importance, and too much thought of, not only in the city, but in all Scotland, for a circumstance concerning him to pass unnoticed. The Lord Provost, first magistrate of Edinburgh, the bailiffs, the barristers—most of whom were friends of the engineer—commenced the most active search. Agents were sent through the country, but no result was obtained.

It then became necessary to insert in the leading newspapers of the United Kingdom an advertisement relating to the engineer, James Starr, describing him, naming the date when he left Edinburgh, and then there was nothing to do but wait. That was not done without great anxiety. The savants of England were almost convinced that one of their most distinguished members had disappeared.

While there was so much anxiety over the disappearance of James Starr, the disappearance of Harry was the subject of a peroccupation none the less earnest; only, instead of occupying public opinion, the old overseer's son only troubled the good humor of his friends, Jack Ryan.

It may be recollected that, on their meeting in the Yarrow shaft, Jack Ryan had invited Harry to come, eight days after, to the Clan Irvin merry-making. He had Harry's formal acceptance and promise to be there on this occasion. Jack Ryan knew, having verified it many times, that his companion was a man of his word; with him, a thing promised was a thing done.

Now, at the Irvin's festival nothing failed, neither the songs nor the dances, nor the enjoyments of all kinds—nothing, if it were not Harry Ford. Jack Ryan had commenced by longing for him, because his friends absence affected his good humor. He forgot the words in the middle of one of his songs, and for the first time stopped short during a jig which generally brought him well-merited applause.

It must be said here, that the advertisement relative to James Starr, and published in the newspapers, had not yet come under Jack Ryan's eyes. This brave fellow was worried over Harry's absence, saying to himself, that only an important reason would prevent him keeping his promise. So, the day after the Irvin festival, Jack intended to take the Glasgow Railroad, and go to the Dochart Pit—and he would have done it had not an accident happened which cost him his life.

This is what happened during the night of the 12th of December. In truth, the fact of a nature to encourage all believers in the supernatural, and they were numerous on the Melrose Farm.

Irvin, a small maritime village of the County Renfrew, which numbers about seven thousand inhabitants, is built in an abrupt bend of the Scotch coast, almost at the mouth of the Gulf of Clyde. Its port, well sheltered from the seawinds, is lighted by an important lighthouse, which shows the shoals and reefs in such a manner that the prudent sailor cannot be deceived. Thus shipwreckers were rare on this part of the coast, and the coasters, whether embarked on the Gulf of Clyde to reach Glasgow, or knocking about the Bay of Irvine, could maneuver without danger, even in the darkest nights.

When a town is provided with a historical past, no matter how trifling, when its castle once belonged to Robert Stuart, it cannot but possess certain ruins.

Now, in Scotland, all ruins are haunted by spirits. At least that is the general opinion in the highlands and Lowlands.

The oldest ruins, and also those with the worst reputation on this part of the coast, were precisely those of the castle of Robert Stuart, which is called Dundonald Castle.

At this period, Dundonald Castle, the refuge of all the stray goblins in the country, was completely deserted. It was seldom visited on its high rock which it occupied above the sea, two miles from the town. Perhaps strangers still liked to investigate these old historical remains, but then they went there by themselves. The people of Irvin would not have guided them for any price whatever. In fact, some histories were in circulation that certain "Fire Ladies" haunted the old castle.

The most superstitious affirmed that they had seen these fantastic creatures with their own eyes. Naturally, Jack Ryan was among the latter.

The truth is, that from time to time, long flames appeared on the front of a half fallen-in wall; sometimes at the top of the tower which overlooks all the ruins of Dundonald Castle.

Have these flames a human form, as some affirm? Do they deserve the name of "Fire-Ladies," given them by the people of the coast? It was evidently an illusion of the brain, increased to a superstition, and science could have explained this physical phenomenon.

Whatever they were, the Fire-Ladies had throughout the country, the well established reputation of frequenting the ruins of the old castle, and of their executing strange dances, principally on dark nights. Jack Ryan, brave as he was, would have risked accompanying them with the big strains of his bag-pipe.

"The Old-Nick is enough for them," he said, "and he doesn't need me to complete his infernal orchestra!"

We can believe that these odd appearances furnish the usual texts for evening tales. Thus, Jack Ryan had quite a repertory of legends about the "Fire-Ladies," and never found himself at a loss when called upon to speak of them.

Thus, during this last vigil, well washed down with ale, brandy and whiskey, which had ended the Clan-Irvin merry-making, Jack Ryan had not failed to take up his favorite subject, to the great pleasure, perhaps the great terror of his audience.

The gathering was held in a large farm of the Melrose Farm, on the confines of the coast. A good coke fire burned on a sheet iron tripod, placed in the midst of the company.

Out doors it was stormy. Thick fogs rolled over the waves, while a strong breeze from the southeast brought in from the ocean. A black night, not a gleam in the clouds, the earth, the sky and the water being confound-

ed in the profound shadows. This made it difficult to navigate. In Irvine Bay, if any vessel should be driven in by the winds that beat on the coast.

The little port of Irvin was not much frequented—at least by vessels of a certain tonnage. Trading vessels, whether steam or sail, coast a little more to the north, when they want to navigate the Gulf Clyde.

That evening, however, a fisherman detained on the bank had perceived, not without surprise, a vessel steering toward the coast. If the day had suddenly dawned, it would have been not only with surprise but with terror, that this vessel would have been watched running before the wind every sail set. The entrance of the Gulf passed, there was no refuge among the formidable rocks of the coast. If this imprudent vessel persisted in coming nearer, how could it be saved?

The merry-making was about to be ended by a last story from Jack Ryan. His listeners transported into the world of phantoms were just in the condition to believe in the supernatural.

Suddenly cries were heard from without. Jack Ryan immediately stopped his narrative, and all rushed from the barn.

The night was dark. Gusts of rain and wind blew on the beach.

Two or three fisherman protected by a rock which kept of the gusts of air, were shouting vociferously;

Jack Ryan and his companion ran to them.

These cries were not addressed to the inhabitants of the farm, but to a crew which without knowing it, were hastening to destruction.

In fact a dark mass appeared indistinctly a few cables length away from them. It was a vessel easily recognized by its stationary lights, for it carried a white light at its mizzen-mast, a green light at its starboard, and a red light at its larboard. They saw it driving ahead, and it was manifest that it was driving at full speed toward the coast.

"A ship going to destruction!" cried Jack Ryan.

"Yes," answered one of the fisherman, "and it must tack about now, or it will be lost!"

"Signals, signals!" cried one of the Scotchmen.

"Which?" replied the fisherman. "In this squall we could not keep a torch lighted."

And, while these remarks were being readily made, new cries of warning were uttered. But how could they be heard in the midst of this tempest? The crew of the vessel had no longer any prospect of escaping shipwreck.

"Why maneuver in that manner?" cried one seaman.

"Does she, then, want to gain the shore?" answered another.

"The captain has no knowledge of the Irvin lighthouse?" asked Jack Ryan.

"I should think so," replied one of the fisherman, "unless he has been deceived by some—"

The fisherman had not finished his answer, when Jack Ryan uttered a fearful cry. Was it heard by the crew? At all events, it was too late for the vessel to release itself from the line of breakers which looked white in the darkness.

But it was not, as one might suppose, an attempt of Jack Ryens to warn the lost vessel, Jack Ryan was then standing with his back to the sea. His companions also, were looking at a point situated half a mile from the strand.

It was the Castle of Dundonald. A long flame was twisted about by gusts of wind, on the top of the old tower.

"The Fire-Lady!" all these superstitious Scotchmen cried out, in great terror.

Frankly, it required a great deal of imagination to find a human form in this flame. Blown about, like a luminous veil beneath the breeze, it seemed at times to encircle the top of the tower, as if it were on the point of being extinguished, and a moment after it would unite again at its bluish extremity.

"The Fire-Lady! the Fire-Lady!" cried the fisherman and the frightened peasants.

All was then explained. It was evident that the ship, put out of her reckoning in the fog, had lost her course and that she had taken this flame; I lit on the top of Dundonald castle, for the Irvin lighthouse. She thought herself in the entrance of the Gulf, situated ten miles farther north, and she was running toward a rock coast, which offered her no refuge!

What could be done to save her, if not already too late? Perhaps they would ascend to the ruins, and attempt to extinguish this so that it could no longer be confounded with the lighthouse at Port Irvin!

Doubtless, this was the way they should act, and without delay; but which of the Scotchmen would have the thought, and after the thought, the audacity to brave the Fire-Lady? Jack Ryan, perhaps, for he was brave, and his credulity, strong as it was, could not prevent him from doing a generous action.

He was too late. A horrible crash sounded through the war of the elements.

The vessel had just struck aft. Her lights were extinguished. The whitish line of the surf seemed broken for a moment. It was the ship which stranded, capsized, and went to pieces on the reefs.

And at this same moment, by a coincidence which could only be due to chance, the long flame disappeared, as if snatched away by a violent gust. The sea, the sky, the strand

were immediately plunged again into the most profound darkness.

"The Fire-Lady!" cried Jack Ryan again when this apparition, supernatural for him and his companions, suddenly vanished.

But then, the courage which these superstitious Scotchmen lacked against an imaginary danger, they found in the presence of real danger, now that there were fellow-beings to be saved. The wild elements did not stop them. By means of cords thrown into the waves—as heroic as they had been credulous—they cast themselves into the waves to succor the ship wrecked vessel.

Happily, they succeeded, not all, but some of them—and the brave Jack Ryan was one of the number—were grievously wounded on the rocks; but the captain of the vessel and the eight men of the crew were laid, safe and sound on the strand.

This vessel was the Norwegian brig "Motata," laden with wood from the north on the way to Glasgow.

It was only too true. The captain deceived by this light, lit on the tower of Dundonald Castle, had just been driven on shore, instead of making the Gulf of Clyde.

And, now, there was nothing left of the "Motata," but the stranded wreck, of which the surf was breaking up the remains on the rocks of the coast.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK RYAN'S EXPLOITS.

Jack Ryan and three of his companions wounded like him, had been carried into one of the rooms of the Melrose Farm, where every care was immediately lavished on them.

Jack Ryan had been the most badly treated for, at the moment when, the rope round his waist, he had thrown himself into the sea, the furious waves had rudely rolled him on the reefs. It was only strange that his comrades got him alive to the bank.

The brave fellow was thus confined to his bed for several days. This enraged him. However, when he had been given permission to sing as much as he wished, he took his sickness more patiently, and the Melrose Farm resounded every hour with his joyous bursts of song. But Jack Ryan in this adventure only felt a strong sentiment of fear in regard to the brawnies and other goblins who amused themselves in tormenting poor people, and he thought them responsible for the catastrophe to the "Motata." It would have been useless to tell him that the Fire-Ladies did not exist, and that this flame so suddenly projected between the ruins was duly only to physical phenomena. No reasoning could have convinced him of it. His companions were still more obstinate than he in their credulity. To believe them, one of the Ladies of Fire had wickedly attracted the "Motata" to the coast. It would be as easy to punish them as to impose a penalty on the storm! The magistrates might decree any proceedings they pleased. You cannot imprison a flame, or chain an impalpable being. And, if it must be said the inquiries which were afterward made seemed to give reason, at least in appearance, to the superstitious way of explaining events.

A magistrate, charged with directing an inquiry relative to the loss of the "Motata," came to interrogate the various witnesses of the catastrophe. All agreed on this point, that the shipwreck was due to the supernatural apparition of a Fire-Lady in the ruins of the Castle of Dundonald. We know that reason could not agree with such explanations. There was no doubt that a purely physical phenomenon was produced in those ruins. But was it accident or malevolence? This was what the magistrate should seek to establish.

The word "malevolence" is not surprising. It is not necessary to seek far in maritime history to find justification for it. Many wreckers on the coast of Brittany have used this means of attracting vessels to the shore, in order to divide the spoils. Sometimes a clump of resinous trees, ignited during the night, guided a ship into the shoals from which it could not get out. Often a torch, fastened to the horns of a bull, and moving at the caprice of the animal deceived a ship as to the course it should follow. The result of these maneuvers was in evitably a shipwreck, by which the wreckers profited. The intervention of justice and severe examples were necessary to destroy these barbarous customs. Might it not be that, in this case, a criminal hand had made use of the old traditions of the wreckers?

Whatever Jack Ryan and his companions thought, this was what the police believed. The former, when they had heard the inquiry mentioned divided into two parties—one contented itself with shrugging their shoulders; the other, more fearful, announced that, undoubtedly, to thus provoke supernatural beings was to bring of new catastrophes.

Nevertheless, the inquiry was made with much care. The policemen went to Dundonald Castle, and proceeded with the most vigorous search. The magistrate wished first to ascertain if the soil had preserved any footprints which could be attributed to other feet than those of goblins. It was impossible to find the slightest trace, either old or new. Yet the ground, still quite wet from the rain of the day before, would have preserved the least vestige.

[To be Continued.]