

## CHAPTER IX. THE FIRE-MAIDENS

A WEEK after the events just related had taken place, James Starr's friends had become very anxious. The engineer had disappeared, and no reason could be brought forward to explain his absence. They learnt, by questioning his servant, that he had embarked at Granton Pier. But from that time there were no traces of James Starr. Simon Ford's letter had requested secrecy, and he had said nothing of his departure for the Aberfoyle mines.

Therefore in Edinburgh nothing was talked of but the unaccountable absence of the engineer. Sir W. Elphiston, the President of the Royal Institution, communicated to his colleagues a letter which James Starr had sent him, excusing himself from being present at the next meeting of the society. Two or three others produced similar letters. But though these documents proved that Starr had left Edinburgh--which was known before--they threw no light on what had become of him. Now, on the part of such a man, this prolonged absence, so contrary to his usual habits, naturally first caused surprise, and then anxiety.

A notice was inserted in the principal newspapers of the United Kingdom relative to the engineer James Starr, giving a description of him and the date on which he left Edinburgh; nothing more could be done but to wait. The time passed in great anxiety. The scientific world of England was inclined to believe that one of its most distinguished members

had positively disappeared. At the same time, when so many people were thinking about James Starr, Harry Ford was the subject of no less anxiety. Only, instead of occupying public attention, the son of the old overman was the cause of trouble alone to the generally cheerful mind of Jack Ryan.

It may be remembered that, in their encounter in the Yarrow shaft, Jack Ryan had invited Harry to come a week afterwards to the festivities at Irvine. Harry had accepted and promised expressly to be there. Jack Ryan knew, having had it proved by many circumstances, that his friend was a man of his word. With him, a thing promised was a thing done. Now, at the Irvine merry-making, nothing was wanting; neither song, nor dance, nor fun of any sort--nothing but Harry Ford.

The notice relative to James Starr, published in the papers, had not yet been seen by Ryan. The honest fellow was therefore only worried by Harry's absence, telling himself that something serious could alone have prevented him from keeping his promise. So, the day after the Irvine games, Jack Ryan intended to take the railway from Glasgow and go to the Dochart pit; and this he would have done had he not been detained by an accident which nearly cost him his life. Something which occurred on the night of the 12th of December was of a nature to support the opinions of all partisans of the supernatural, and there were many at Melrose Farm.

Irvine, a little seaport of Renfrew, containing nearly seven thousand inhabitants, lies in a sharp bend made by the Scottish coast, near the

mouth of the Firth of Clyde. The most ancient and the most famed ruins on this part of the coast were those of this castle of Robert Stuart, which bore the name of Dundonald Castle.

At this period Dundonald Castle, a refuge for all the stray goblins of the country, was completely deserted. It stood on the top of a high rock, two miles from the town, and was seldom visited. Sometimes a few strangers took it into their heads to explore these old historical remains, but then they always went alone. The inhabitants of Irvine would not have taken them there at any price. Indeed, several legends were based on the story of certain "fire-maidens," who haunted the old castle.

The most superstitious declared they had seen these fantastic creatures with their own eyes. Jack Ryan was naturally one of them. It was a fact that from time to time long flames appeared, sometimes on a broken piece of wall, sometimes on the summit of the tower which was the highest point of Dundonald Castle.

Did these flames really assume a human shape, as was asserted? Did they merit the name of fire-maidens, given them by the people of the coast? It was evidently just an optical delusion, aided by a good deal of credulity, and science could easily have explained the phenomenon.

However that might be, these fire-maidens had the reputation of frequenting the ruins of the old castle and there performing wild

strathspeys, especially on dark nights. Jack Ryan, bold fellow though he was, would never have dared to accompany those dances with the music of his bagpipes.

"Old Nick is enough for them!" said he. "He doesn't need me to complete his infernal orchestra."

We may well believe that these strange apparitions frequently furnished a text for the evening stories. Jack Ryan was ending the evening with one of these. His auditors, transported into the phantom world, were worked up into a state of mind which would believe anything.

All at once shouts were heard outside. Jack Ryan stopped short in the middle of his story, and all rushed out of the barn. The night was pitchy dark. Squalls of wind and rain swept along the beach. Two or three fishermen, their backs against a rock, the better to resist the wind, were shouting at the top of their voices.

Jack Ryan and his companions ran up to them. The shouts were, however, not for the inhabitants of the farm, but to warn men who, without being aware of it, were going to destruction. A dark, confused mass appeared some way out at sea. It was a vessel whose position could be seen by her lights, for she carried a white one on her foremast, a green on the starboard side, and a red on the outside. She was evidently running straight on the rocks.

"A ship in distress?" said Ryan.

"Ay," answered one of the fishermen, "and now they want to tack, but it's too late!"

"Do they want to run ashore?" said another.

"It seems so," responded one of the fishermen, "unless he has been misled by some--"

The man was interrupted by a yell from Jack. Could the crew have heard it? At any rate, it was too late for them to beat back from the line of breakers which gleamed white in the darkness.

But it was not, as might be supposed, a last effort of Ryan's to warn the doomed ship. He now had his back to the sea. His companions turned also, and gazed at a spot situated about half a mile inland. It was Dundonald Castle. A long flame twisted and bent under the gale, on the summit of the old tower.

"The Fire-Maiden!" cried the superstitious men in terror.

Clearly, it needed a good strong imagination to find any human likeness in that flame. Waving in the wind like a luminous flag, it seemed sometimes to fly round the tower, as if it was just going out, and a moment after it was seen again dancing on its blue point.

"The Fire-Maiden! the Fire-Maiden!" cried the terrified fishermen and peasants.

All was then explained. The ship, having lost her reckoning in the fog, had taken this flame on the top of Dundonald Castle for the Irvine light. She thought herself at the entrance of the Firth, ten miles to the north, when she was really running on a shore which offered no refuge.

What could be done to save her, if there was still time? It was too late. A frightful crash was heard above the tumult of the elements. The vessel had struck. The white line of surf was broken for an instant; she heeled over on her side and lay among the rocks.

At the same time, by a strange coincidence, the long flame disappeared, as if it had been swept away by a violent gust. Earth, sea, and sky were plunged in complete darkness.

"The Fire-Maiden!" shouted Ryan, for the last time, as the apparition, which he and his companions believed supernatural, disappeared. But then the courage of these superstitious Scotchmen, which had failed before a fancied danger, returned in face of a real one, which they were ready to brave in order to save their fellow-creatures. The tempest did not deter them. As heroic as they had before been credulous, fastening ropes round

their waists, they rushed into the waves to the aid of those on the wreck.

Happily, they succeeded in their endeavors, although some--and bold Jack Ryan was among the number--were severely wounded on the rocks. But the captain of the vessel and the eight sailors who composed his crew were hauled up, safe and sound, on the beach.

The ship was the Norwegian brig MOTALA, laden with timber, and bound for Glasgow. Of the MOTALA herself nothing remained but a few spars, washed up by the waves, and dashed among the rocks on the beach.

Jack Ryan and three of his companions, wounded like himself, were carried into a room of Melrose Farm, where every care was lavished on them. Ryan was the most hurt, for when with the rope round his waist he had rushed into the sea, the waves had almost immediately dashed him back against the rocks. He was brought, indeed, very nearly lifeless on to the beach.

The brave fellow was therefore confined to bed for several days, to his great disgust. However, as soon as he was given permission to sing as much as he liked, he bore his trouble patiently, and the farm echoed all day with his jovial voice. But from this adventure he imbibed a more lively sentiment of fear with regard to brownies and other goblins who amuse themselves by plaguing mankind, and he made them responsible for the catastrophe of the Motala. It would have been vain to try and

convince him that the Fire-Maidens did not exist, and that the flame, so suddenly appearing among the ruins, was but a natural phenomenon. No reasoning could make him believe it. His companions were, if possible, more obstinate than he in their credulity. According to them, one of the Fire-Maidens had maliciously attracted the MOTALA to the coast. As to wishing to punish her, as well try to bring the tempest to justice! The magistrates might order what arrests they pleased, but a flame cannot be imprisoned, an impalpable being can't be handcuffed. It must be acknowledged that the researches which were ultimately made gave ground, at least in appearance, to this superstitious way of explaining the facts.

The inquiry was made with great care. Officials came to Dundonald Castle, and they proceeded to conduct a most vigorous search. The magistrate wished first to ascertain if the ground bore any footprints, which could be attributed to other than goblins' feet. It was impossible to find the least trace, whether old or new. Moreover, the earth, still damp from the rain of the day before, would have preserved the least vestige.

The result of all this was, that the magistrates only got for their trouble a new legend added to so many others--a legend which would be perpetuated by the remembrance of the catastrophe of the MOTALA, and indisputably confirm the truth of the apparition of the Fire-Maidens.

A hearty fellow like Jack Ryan, with so strong a constitution, could not



be long confined to his bed. A few sprains and bruises were not quite enough to keep him on his back longer than he liked. He had not time to be ill.

Jack, therefore, soon got well. As soon as he was on his legs again, before resuming his work on the farm, he wished to go and visit his friend Harry, and learn why he had not come to the Irvine merry-making. He could not understand his absence, for Harry was not a man who would willingly promise and not perform. It was unlikely, too, that the son of the old overman had not heard of the wreck of the MOTALA, as it was in all the papers. He must know the part Jack had taken in it, and what had happened to him, and it was unlike Harry not to hasten to the farm and see how his old chum was going on.

As Harry had not come, there must have been something to prevent him. Jack Ryan would as soon deny the existence of the Fire-Maidens as believe in Harry's indifference.

Two days after the catastrophe Jack left the farm merrily, feeling nothing of his wounds. Singing in the fullness of his heart, he awoke the echoes of the cliff, as he walked to the station of the railway, which VIA Glasgow would take him to Stirling and Callander.

As he was waiting for his train, his attention was attracted by a bill posted up on the walls, containing the following notice:

"On the 4th of December, the engineer, James Starr, of Edinburgh, embarked from Granton Pier, on board the Prince of Wales. He disembarked the same day at Stirling. From that time nothing further has been heard of him.

"Any information concerning him is requested to be sent to the President of the Royal Institution, Edinburgh."

Jack Ryan, stopping before one of these advertisements, read it twice over, with extreme surprise.

"Mr. Starr!" he exclaimed. "Why, on the 4th of December I met him with Harry on the ladder of the Dochart pit! That was ten days ago! And he has not been seen from that time! That explains why my chum didn't come to Irvine."

And without taking time to inform the President of the Royal Institution by letter, what he knew relative to James Starr, Jack jumped into the train, determining to go first of all to the Yarrow shaft. There he would descend to the depths of the pit, if necessary, to find Harry, and with him was sure to be the engineer James Starr.

"They haven't turned up again," said he to himself. "Why? Has anything prevented them? Could any work of importance keep them still at the bottom of the mine? I must find out!" and Ryan, hastening his steps, arrived in less than an hour at the Yarrow shaft.

Externally nothing was changed. The same silence around. Not a living creature was moving in that desert region. Jack entered the ruined shed which covered the opening of the shaft. He gazed down into the dark abyss--nothing was to be seen. He listened--nothing was to be heard.

"And my lamp!" he exclaimed; "suppose it isn't in its place!" The lamp which Ryan used when he visited the pit was usually deposited in a corner, near the landing of the topmost ladder. It had disappeared.

"Here is a nuisance!" said Jack, beginning to feel rather uneasy. Then, without hesitating, superstitious though he was, "I will go," said he, "though it's as dark down there as in the lowest depths of the infernal regions!"

And he began to descend the long flight of ladders, which led down the gloomy shaft. Jack Ryan had not forgotten his old mining habits, and he was well acquainted with the Dochart pit, or he would scarcely have dared to venture thus. He went very carefully, however. His foot tried each round, as some of them were worm-eaten. A false step would entail a deadly fall, through this space of fifteen hundred feet. He counted each landing as he passed it, knowing that he could not reach the bottom of the shaft until he had left the thirtieth. Once there, he would have no trouble, so he thought, in finding the cottage, built, as we have said, at the extremity of the principal passage.

Jack Ryan went on thus until he got to the twenty-sixth landing, and consequently had two hundred feet between him and the bottom.

Here he put down his leg to feel for the first rung of the twenty-seventh ladder. But his foot swinging in space found nothing to rest on. He knelt down and felt about with his hand for the top of the ladder. It was in vain.

"Old Nick himself must have been down this way!" said Jack, not without a slight feeling of terror.

He stood considering for some time, with folded arms, and longing to be able to pierce the impenetrable darkness. Then it occurred to him that if he could not get down, neither could the inhabitants of the mine get up. There was now no communication between the depths of the pit and the upper regions. If the removal of the lower ladders of the Yarrow shaft had been effected since his last visit to the cottage, what had become of Simon Ford, his wife, his son, and the engineer?

The prolonged absence of James Starr proved that he had not left the pit since the day Ryan met with him in the shaft. How had the cottage been provisioned since then? The food of these unfortunate people, imprisoned fifteen hundred feet below the surface of the ground, must have been exhausted by this time.

All this passed through Jack's mind, as he saw that by himself he could

do nothing to get to the cottage. He had no doubt but that communication had been interrupted with a malevolent intention. At any rate, the authorities must be informed, and that as soon as possible. Jack Ryan bent forward from the landing.

"Harry! Harry!" he shouted with his powerful voice.

Harry's name echoed and re-echoed among the rocks, and finally died away in the depths of the shaft.

Ryan rapidly ascended the upper ladders and returned to the light of day. Without losing a moment he reached the Callander station, just caught the express to Edinburgh, and by three o'clock was before the Lord Provost.

There his declaration was received. His account was given so clearly that it could not be doubted. Sir William Elphiston, President of the Royal Institution, and not only colleague, but a personal friend of Starr's, was also informed, and asked to direct the search which was to be made without delay in the mine. Several men were placed at his disposal, supplied with lamps, picks, long rope ladders, not forgetting provisions and cordials. Then guided by Jack Ryan, the party set out for the Aberfoyle mines.

The same evening the expedition arrived at the opening of the Yarrow shaft, and descended to the twenty-seventh landing, at which Jack Ryan

had been stopped a few hours previously. The lamps, fastened to long ropes, were lowered down the shaft, and it was thus ascertained that the four last ladders were wanting.

As soon as the lamps had been brought up, the men fixed to the landing a rope ladder, which unrolled itself down the shaft, and all descended one after the other. Jack Ryan's descent was the most difficult, for he went first down the swinging ladders, and fastened them for the others.

The space at the bottom of the shaft was completely deserted; but Sir William was much surprised at hearing Jack Ryan exclaim, "Here are bits of the ladders, and some of them half burnt!"

"Burnt?" repeated Sir William. "Indeed, here sure enough are cinders which have evidently been cold a long time!"

"Do you think, sir," asked Ryan, "that Mr. Starr could have had any reason for burning the ladders, and thus breaking of communication with the world?"

"Certainly not," answered Sir William Elphiston, who had become very thoughtful. "Come, my lad, lead us to the cottage. There we shall ascertain the truth."

Jack Ryan shook his head, as if not at all convinced. Then, taking a lamp from the hands of one of the men, he proceeded with a rapid step

along the principal passage of the Dochart pit. The others all followed him.

In a quarter of an hour the party arrived at the excavation in which stood Simon Ford's cottage. There was no light in the window. Ryan darted to the door, and threw it open. The house was empty.

They examined all the rooms in the somber habitation. No trace of violence was to be found. All was in order, as if old Madge had been still there. There was even an ample supply of provisions, enough to last the Ford family for several days.

The absence of the tenants of the cottage was quite unaccountable. But was it not possible to find out the exact time they had quitted it? Yes, for in this region, where there was no difference of day or night, Madge was accustomed to mark with a cross each day in her almanac.

The almanac was pinned up on the wall, and there the last cross had been made at the 6th of December; that is to say, a day after the arrival of James Starr, to which Ryan could positively swear. It was clear that on the 6th of December, ten days ago, Simon Ford, his wife, son, and guest, had quitted the cottage. Could a fresh exploration of the mine, undertaken by the engineer, account for such a long absence? Certainly not.

It was intensely dark all round. The lamps held by the men gave light

only just where they were standing. Suddenly Jack Ryan uttered a cry.

"Look there, there!"

His finger was pointing to a tolerably bright light, which was moving about in the distance. "After that light, my men!" exclaimed Sir William.

"It's a goblin light!" said Ryan. "So what's the use? We shall never catch it."

The president and his men, little given to superstition, darted off in the direction of the moving light. Jack Ryan, bravely following their example, quickly overtook the head-most of the party.

It was a long and fatiguing chase. The lantern seemed to be carried by a being of small size, but singular agility.

Every now and then it disappeared behind some pillar, then was seen again at the end of a cross gallery. A sharp turn would place it out of sight, and it seemed to have completely disappeared, when all at once there would be the light as bright as ever. However, they gained very little on it, and Ryan's belief that they could never catch it seemed far from groundless.

After an hour of this vain pursuit Sir William Elphiston and his companions had gone a long way in the southwest direction of the pit,



and began to think they really had to do with an impalpable being. Just then it seemed as if the distance between the goblin and those who were pursuing it was becoming less. Could it be fatigued, or did this invisible being wish to entice Sir William and his companions to the place where the inhabitants of the cottage had perhaps themselves been enticed. It was hard to say.

The men, seeing that the distance lessened, redoubled their efforts. The light which had before burnt at a distance of more than two hundred feet before them was now seen at less than fifty. The space continued to diminish. The bearer of the lamp became partially visible. Sometimes, when it turned its head, the indistinct profile of a human face could be made out, and unless a sprite could assume bodily shape, Jack Ryan was obliged to confess that here was no supernatural being. Then, springing forward,--

"Courage, comrades!" he exclaimed; "it is getting tired! We shall soon catch it up now, and if it can talk as well as it can run we shall hear a fine story."

But the pursuit had suddenly become more difficult. They were in unknown regions of the mine; narrow passages crossed each other like the windings of a labyrinth. The bearer of the lamp might escape them as easily as possible, by just extinguishing the light and retreating into some dark refuge.

"And indeed," thought Sir William, "if it wishes to avoid us, why does it not do so?"

Hitherto there had evidently been no intention to avoid them, but just as the thought crossed Sir William's mind the light suddenly disappeared, and the party, continuing the pursuit, found themselves before an extremely narrow natural opening in the schistous rocks.

To trim their lamps, spring forward, and dart through the opening, was for Sir William and his party but the work of an instant. But before they had gone a hundred paces along this new gallery, much wider and loftier than the former, they all stopped short. There, near the wall, lay four bodies, stretched on the ground--four corpses, perhaps!

"James Starr!" exclaimed Sir William Elphiston.

"Harry! Harry!" cried Ryan, throwing himself down beside his friend.

It was indeed the engineer, Madge, Simon, and Harry Ford who were lying there motionless. But one of the bodies moved slightly, and Madge's voice was heard faintly murmuring, "See to the others! help them first!"

Sir William, Jack, and their companions endeavored to reanimate the engineer and his friends by getting them to swallow a few drops of brandy. They very soon succeeded. The unfortunate people, shut up in

that dark cavern for ten days, were dying of starvation. They must have perished had they not on three occasions found a loaf of bread and a jug of water set near them. No doubt the charitable being to whom they owed their lives was unable to do more for them.

Sir William wondered whether this might not have been the work of the strange sprite who had allured them to the very spot where James Starr and his companions lay.

However that might be, the engineer, Madge, Simon, and Harry Ford were saved. They were assisted to the cottage, passing through the narrow opening which the bearer of the strange light had apparently wished to point out to Sir William. This was a natural opening. The passage which James Starr and his companions had made for themselves with dynamite had been completely blocked up with rocks laid one upon another.

So, then, whilst they had been exploring the vast cavern, the way back had been purposely closed against them by a hostile hand.