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THE "ISIS" MYSTERY.

The Story of a Missing Ship.

By LEON LEWIS.

CHAPTER XII.

FOUND IN BAD COMPANY.

The scheming Paxter, like many a villain, had pursued his evil ways triumphantly. A hut of considerable size had been erected in a sheltered nook of the island of Blanquilla—at no great distance, in fact, from the solitary rill of water by which the island is watered—and the wreck of the yacht had been completely dismantled to furnish the timbers for the purpose. To this hut had been duly transported all the stores saved from the waves, and then Paxter had settled down to the great object for which the *Fleetwing* had been hurled to destruction.

This object was simply—*to wait!*

'We may stay here a year,' he said to one of his most trusted confederates, the evening after the installation of the shipwrecked party in the hut. 'The old man and the girl are still quite feeble with their sea-sickness, fever, or what not,' and he laughed softly. 'It's a sad misfortune, to be sure, but I hope we shall all be endowed with patience.'

The next two or three days seemed to confirm Paxter's view of the case. No sail was seen, no sign of relief in any quarter. Both Ildrie and her father were so impressed with the hopelessness of their situation that they hardly left the rude shelter with which they had been provided.

But on the fourth day of their occupancy of the hut, an incident occurred which completely changed the whole current of their thoughts, or rather intensified their every sentiment for the present and future.

At the head of a little party of his men, Paxter had pushed off in the solitary boat which had survived the shipwreck, to one of the outlying reefs, with a view to taking a few nice fish for dinner. Availing themselves of his absence, Ildrie and the merchant had walked out to a neighboring cove, where they had found a sheltered resting place, which admitted of their seeing everything around them, at the same time that they were themselves concealed from all observation. And while they were thus scanning their surroundings and discussing their prospects, they beheld Paxter and his men returning from their expedition. In ordinary circumstances, the boat would not have commanded a second glance, but now she was struggling in a sudden squall which had rushed in upon her from the offing.

'They'll be swamped, if they don't have a care,' said Mr. Ryell, as his glances followed the movements of the boat. 'Heavens! there they go!'

The exclamation was only too true. A sudden and terrific gust of wind had struck the boat and hurled her bottom upwards.

The first impulse of the merchant was to spring to the rescue, but he did not not upon it.

'We cannot help them,' he murmured. 'Doubtless they will right the boat and save themselves, as they must all be good swimmers. Doubtless, too, those on shore will go to their aid.'

The squall blew up such a about mist as is usually the case, that the boat and the struggling men in the water were promptly shut out from the view of the merchant and his daughter. At the end of a few anxious minutes, they walked along the shore in the direction of the spot to which the boat was likely to be driven, and in due course heard cries of distress at no great distance from the beach.

'We may be of use here,' said Mr. Ryell, coming to a halt and endeavoring to pierce the dense mist which still covered the entire shore. 'They may drift or swim to this spot.'

The cries of distress he had heard were several times gaspingly repeated, and then all became silent—all save the wild rush and roar of the winds and waters.

'I fear they have been more unfortunate than we supposed, father,' murmured Ildrie, shuddering at the terrific noise of the waves that came tumbling upon the beach. 'And see! look! yonder that the body of a man—there! just under the crest of that largest billow?'

The glances of Mr. Ryell quickly followed Ildrie's direction of the outstretched arm.

'Yes, it's a man,' he replied—'it's Ellington! Heaven grant that he may come yonder rocks and be dashed up within our reach!'

The prayer was quickly answered. The senseless body hung, suspended in the long crests of the waves, and

'Yes,' returned Mr. Ryell. 'They are near us at every stroke. Can it be that Paxter—'

'No, father. They come from the opposite direction—from the southward.'

A thrill of hope traversed the hearts of both.

'It's even so,' confirmed the merchant, after a brief but exciting period of listening. 'Here they come!'

A boat was indeed nearing the beach directly in front of the couple. There were two men in it, as the watchers managed to make out at the instant the boat rounded upon the beach.

'We must be quick,' said one of these men to the other, as they both leaped ashore, 'or the cap'n'll swear us out of our boots!'

Proceeding to the foot of the very bank upon which the merchant and Ildrie had paused, the two new comers proceeded to exhume from the sand a small chest, bound with stout hoops of iron.

'Everything is safe, it seems,' said one, as they raised the chest and began bearing it towards the boat.

'It could not well be otherwise,' was the response, 'since no one ever comes here. And now for a good run for the main!'

'The men are smugglers,' whispered Mr. Ryell to Ildrie, 'and they have a ship in waiting. What better can we do than avail ourselves of their presence?'

To think in such an emergency was to act. The father and daughter hastened after the two men, overtaking them at the moment when they were about to push off the boat.

'It's well there's a petticoat in the case,' said one of the two strangers, in response to a few words of appeal from the merchant, 'or I should respond with a bullet. Who and what are you?'

Mr. Ryell explained.

'Humph! a likely story!' commented the former speaker. 'You'd be likely to fetch up here, to be sure if you were bound for the Cape of Good Hope. That's a story that even the marines would be unable to swallow.'

'But there has been treachery in the case,' protested the merchant.

'I dare say there has, neighbor, but there'll be none between you and us,' continued the stranger. 'You have evidently seen what we have been doing here, and that is a sufficient reason why we must take you to the schooner.'

'Lead on,' returned Mr. Ryell. 'You could not suit us better.'

The couple were soon in the boat, which was pushed off by the two strangers, and in less than a minute thereafter the island of Blanquilla was fading out of sight in the darkness behind them.

'We are at least clear of Paxter and his gang,' whispered Ildrie to her father. 'And I am sure that we can fall into no worse hands than those we have left behind us.'

At the end of a few minutes, the outlines of a schooner lying at anchor loomed up directly ahead of the boat. Not long thereafter the frail craft was alongside, and the father and daughter were assisted to the deck, where they found themselves face to face with the schooner's commander—a sharp-eyed, quick-witted American, of middle age, who, after a few words from the merchant and Ildrie, frankly avowed that he was a smuggler.

'I do not doubt your story, Mr. Ryell, he said, after he had led the unexpected guests to the cabin and made them comfortable, 'but all I can do for you is to carry you to the Main near Puerto Bello.'

'Even that will be a relief, sir,' said the merchant quickly and gratefully. 'For at Puerto Bello, or thereabouts we can doubtless find a ship bound to Europe!'

'Then make yourselves at home here my good sir and madam,' said the smuggler. 'I am going to run in a valuable cargo to-night, and all you have to do is to land with it. In less than five hours you will be safe upon the coast of Venezuela!'

A conversation of considerable length followed, while the father and daughter partook of sundry refreshments which were offered them, and then their host excused himself upon the plea of business and proceeded to the deck.

'It seems, then, that we are really giving Paxter the slip,' cried Mr. Ryell, joyfully, as soon as he was left alone with Ildrie.

'If we only make the land safely,' suggested our heroine. 'I say this because the captain seems nervous and excited, and because I overheard a whisper from his mate about a *guarda costa*.'

'There is, of course, a chance against us,' assented the merchant. 'But let us hope for the best.'

It would be useless to record all the hopes and fears by which the couple were agitated during the few hours the voyage lasted. But at length the schooner came to anchor in a dark and quiet cove, and the smuggler-captain made his appearance.

'Come,' he whispered hurriedly. 'You must lose no time in getting ashore, as the revenue tigers may pounce upon us at any moment.'

The fear proved well founded. The couple had no sooner landed than they found themselves in the hands of revenue officers, and saw that a large force had assailed the smugglers and were in a fair way to capture the schooner. Within five minutes the combat was over, and the smugglers were all dead or prisoners.

It was in vain that Mr. Ryell and our heroine explained matters. They had been found in bad company, and were marched off to prison.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DESPAIRING QUERY.

Mr. Ryell and Ildrie were stunned for a time by the nature and extent of their calamities. Four weeks had passed since their agreement with Paxter and departure from New York, and they were still upon the western side of the Atlantic, and at a greater distance from the Cape of Good Hope than ever.

We have said that they were taken to prison, or somewhere of the smuggler, due to all their explanations, and protestations, but it was only after a long and painful ride, in a springless cart, over a rude and rainy road, that they reached that gloomy destination.

'What place is this?' asked the merchant of the guard, as they entered a large town upon the bank of a noble river.

'Barcelona, Signor.'

The father and daughter exchanged glances. With all his pretended frankness, the smuggler captain had lied to them. It was not near Porto Bello, but just to the eastward of Brazilos, that that enterprising individual had made his latest effort to introduce contraband goods into the republic.

'I might have known as much, if I had reflected a moment,' old Mr. Ryell to Ildrie. 'Porto Bello is quite a distance to the westward.'

The consternation and horror with which the couple found themselves shut up in the prison of Barcelona can be imagined. What a check it was upon their voyage—upon all the great objects of their existence!

Like most of the structures of the land in Spanish America, the prison of Barcelona is a dark and prodential edifice—a mere inclosure of stone, from which light, ventilation and all the other essentials of health are so thoroughly excluded as if some demon had taken charge of it. The food and water served out to the unfortunate inmates were at the date of our narrative—thanks to a revolution that was in progress—such as a genteel dog would have slighted; and the officials were as coarse and forbidding as their surroundings.

'There is one thing certain,' said the merchant to Ildrie, gloomily, after they had surveyed their dungeons, 'our stay here will be short. Either we shall convince these stupid avenue people of our innocence, and be restored to freedom, or we shal catch some fever and perish.'

There is no country in the world where smugglers derive greater profits from their ventures than in Venezuela, and consequently none where the fraternity is more active. The coast line of that republic being nearly two thousand miles in length, and the revenue officers both few and inefficient, it is seldom that any of the offenders are called to account. When one is caught, however, he has to submit to treatment that would hardly be employed except in the case of the worst criminals. The long-corked vials of official wrath are poured out upon the prisoner's devoted head, and nothing is omitted to make of him an 'awful example.'

In falling into the hands of the *guarda costa*, therefore, as related, Mr. Ryell and Ildrie had encountered a most annoying experience.

The only consolations they could obtain were two in number—permission to occupy a couple of rooms communicating, and the promise of a further hearing in the course of the morning.

'This is indeed out of the frying-pan into the fire,' said the merchant, after a long and despairing silence. 'We had better have remained with Paxter upon his island.'

The morning dragged wearily. The promised hearing was not given the prisoners until long after noon, and when it did occur, it resulted in very little. Two or three slight hesitations or reticences were found in the statements of the father and daughter on Paxter's account, and these led the sapient magistrate to the theory that some very nefarious plot was hidden under them. To be upon the safe side he remanded the couple to their dungeons for twenty our hours.

At this point the apprehension of the father and daughter of Paxter gave way to their worst apprehension of a prolonged captivity.

'We may as well tell all,' suggested Ildrie.

Her father assenting, she pound fourth in the most impassioned strain the entire facts in the case. Her declaration lost not a little of their effect through the stupidity of the sworn interpreter; but it was, nevertheless, easy to see that the apathetic magistrate was moved by them.

'And these enemies of yours still remain upon the island of Blanquilla?' was the question which followed her statement.

'They do, Senor!'

'Well, that is not a difficult point to verify,' declared the magistrate, endeavoring to look as wise as stern. 'I will send an officer to Blanquilla immediately. In the meantime I remand you to safe-keeping!'

The pain and impatience with which the merchant and Ildrie found themselves shut up again, were simply beyond expression. Mr. Ryell was so greatly cast down that our heroine was forced to loose sight of her own distress in the duty of affording him consolation.

'Perhaps to-morrow will see us righted,' she kept repeating. 'Let us wait until to-morrow before giving way to despair!'

But the morrow opened darkly enough. The smuggler captain and nearly every member of his band were duly convicted of their offences against the republic, and as duly consigned to punishments which were well calculated to strike terror into the hearts of all following the the same branch of industry. And then the sapient officials turned all their batteries upon the merchant and Ildrie, endeavoring to show that they were in some way associated with the smugglers.

'My envoy has just returned from the island of Blanquilla,' announced the magistrate, in a voice and with a manner calculated to confound the prisoners, 'and I find that there is not a single human being upon it! There is, indeed, a hut upon it, and a wreck off the shore, as you asserted, but the absence of your pretended enemies only makes your situation the more mysterious and suspicious. I remand you both to prison until this time to-morrow.'

It was in vain that Ildrie and the merchant sought to change this decision. Nothing was left them but submission.

'It must be that Paxter and his men have started for the mainland in their boat,' said Ildrie, the first to break the sad silence. 'But will their arrival have be of the least service to us?'

'Of course not,' assented the merchant cheerfully. 'Nothing would please Paxter better than to have us drag out the balance of our twelve months in a dungeon.'

The girl shook her head gravely.

'I do not believe Paxter wants me to die,' she declared, 'and consequently he will not want me to remain longer in this captivity—nor even in this vicinity. This seaport is reputed one of the most unhealthy in the world, and all sorts of fatal fevers are raging on every hand around us. I should sooner expect Paxter to seek my release than my further imprisonment.'

The whole range of speculation was exhausted in the course of the day, but with no other effect than to worry and excite the prisoners. The coming of night found them in a gloomier state of mind than they had known since the beginning of their troubles.

How slowly the hours dragged away!

'I shall not be able to sleep a wink to-night,' murmured Ildrie, in response to an injunction from the merchant, when twelve o'clock was announced by the watchman around them. 'I can only think of the awful fix we are in, and of Jack and the *Isis*.'

'Then we may as well talk,' said the merchant. 'Let us look out on the plaza from my window, and see if we cannot find some distraction.'

The scene that fell beneath the gaze of the couple, as they acted upon Mr. Ryell's proposition, was anything but a distraction. It was simply a dark court-yard of the edifice, with a watchman pacing to and fro immediately under the window in question.

'I think the officials are afraid of a rescue,' said our heroine. 'The strength of the guard looks like it!'

'It is more than probable,' returned Mr. Ryell. 'The convicted smugglers are sufficiently numerous, and they must have been too profitable to many persons to lack for friends now.'

The couple were still speculating upon these problems, when sounds of confusion in the court-yard reached their hearing, followed by sounds of a scuffle immediately under the window of the merchant's dungeon.

'Something is wrong,' breathed Ildrie.

'Whatever is wrong for the authorities may be right for us,' returned Mr. Ryell. 'Listen!'

The cries and movements now reaching the hearing of the couple were surely cries and movements of a desperate struggle.

A large body of armed men had attacked the officials of the prison.

'The smugglers!' murmured Ildrie.

'See, they mean to break in!'

[TO BE CONTINUED].

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