

THE LAMP OF DEATH

A THRILLING STORY OF THE SEA

BY PATRICK MORRIS

Detective Sexton Blake, while resting at Swatley Cove, determines to elucidate the mystery of the Lamp of Death, the terror of all the fisher-folk along the coast. He is visited by Muriel Lane, who tells a sad story. Her father, who was in a fair way to make a fortune out of a new submarine boat, has been ruined by the theft of his plans. Blake promises to help Muriel. Only one man—Frederick Seale, a rejected suitor for her hand—knew the secret of the invention. Blake embarks for Calais, by a vessel carrying bullion from the Bank of England. In mid-Channel he sights the light from the Lamp of Death, and immediately afterwards there is a terrific explosion; the steamer is blown into a thousand pieces, and Blake finds himself, like his fellow-passengers, struggling in the water. A dreadful scene of carnage ensues. Several armed ruffians in a boat kill all those persons who have managed to keep themselves afloat. Blake alone escapes by clinging to the stern of their boat. The talk he overhears reveals to him that the Lamp of Death is a submarine boat used by a piratical crew to blow up vessels carrying bullion for foreign exchange. Towed to shore by the pirates' boat, the detective joins a British vessel, the captain of which gives instant chase to the "Black Barnacle," by which name the finnish submarine freebooters call their vessel. The Lamp of Death is sighted, the "Heptic's" torpedoes are got in readiness, and a deadly battle seems imminent. The crew of the "Barnacle" meanwhile are in a state of mutiny against their captain, Frederick Seale, who threatens to shoot any man who dares disobey him.

"Shure, yer honour," hiccupped Michael Sweeney, "if it's all the same to yerself, I'd prefer a spell longer of life, spakin' for myself, that is. I haven't finished this bottle of the craythur yet, and it'd be a sin to waste it."

His remark broke the spell. With a loud guffaw the others appreciated its humour, and Pete called out:

"Now we're in for it, let's blow this confounded man-o-war to splinters!"

"That's right," said Seale, with a sense of relief; "you've all been well treated by me. You have the best of everything—as much wine and spirits and smokes as you want—and you can only act fair by me by doing as I say."

"Hear, hear!"

"Come along, then! To your places, all of you. Send that corpse down the waste. 'Pull yourselves together.'"

With a cheer the men, shouting a blasphemous chorus at the tops of their voices, set to work.

Screens were drawn over the port-holes, so that the light of the "devil's lamp" was extinguished.

The torpedo-tubes were loaded, and the "Black Barnacle" made ready to sink the "Sea Spray," when suddenly its side was grazed by a torpedo, which shook it from stem to stern.

"Come in, ye beggars, come in!" shouted Seale excitedly, as he felt the shock. "Don't stand there knocking. Now then, boys, give it them back; punch 'em in the stomach!"

He touched an electric button, and instantly a great dynamite torpedo shot upwards in the water.

Captain Dare and his companions on the bridge of the "Sea Spray" stood awaiting the result of their first shot, when, just shaving the stern of their vessel, the "Black Barnacle's" torpedo sprang up high into the air like a rocket, and, turning, dived down into the depths again.

With singular presence of mind, Captain Dare saw his only chance of outwitting his foe.

"Full speed astern!" he cried; and, in a second, the "Sea Spray" was tearing backwards over the position of the "Black Barnacle."

At the same moment Seale, unprepared for this singularly daring manœuvre, had just given the order "Full speed ahead," and so his next shot passed up into the black night a hundred yards in front of the "Sea Spray's" bows, just as one of the latter's torpedoes tore through the water just over the lens of the "Black Barnacle."

Frederick Seale cursed and raved in angry disappointment at thus twice missing, and gave the order to ascend. As he stood on the platform beneath the lens, he saw the keel of the "Sea Spray" looming black overhead.

"Now then for it!" he cried. "By heavens, the next shot shall end this wretched little toy warship. And then back to England to get Muriel." And he ground his teeth savagely as he muttered, "By Jingo, I swear that, by fair means or foul, I'll have her on board before two days, and she shall marry me, whethershe will or no!" And he pressed the electric button once more.

THE BATTLE ABANDONED.

Another torpedo shot quickly upwards through the water, just as the "Sea Spray" swung round at full speed. The hideous engine of death sprang into the air, just grazing the side of the cruiser, and burst high in the heavens, covering the

deck with splinters of metal and sharp jagged pieces of steel.

The consternation on board was awful. A sub-lieutenant and two A.B.'s were killed on



CAREFULLY, GINGERLY, HE LOWERED HIMSELF FROM BOULDER TO CRAG AND FROM TUFT TO LEDGE, WITH THE CUNNING OF ONE WELL USED TO THE TASK.

the spot, whilst several others were seriously wounded by the bursting of the projectile.

"This kind of fighting is not much fun," muttered Captain Dare, disappointedly; "we can do nothing, and are only courting destruction by trying to outwit this unseen fiend."

"Yes," replied Blake; "you are terribly handicapped. You can't fire straight down, and this 'Black Barnacle' can apparently blaze straight up."

Meanwhile, below the surface, as Seale stood beneath the lens of the "Black Barnacle," his chief lieutenant came up to him.

"I think, sir," he said, "that it will be best to give up this game. The men's hearts are not in the work. They were against the fight from the very first, and three misses have not improved their frame of mind. If we go on, you will have to be prepared for an open mutiny; they won't stand it any longer. Red-handed Pete is far from pleasant now."

Seale saw, from his tone of voice, that even his lieutenant was at one with the crew. He grew livid with passion, and smoked hard in silence for a time.

At last he saw that it was no good opposing the unanimous wishes of his men, and so, with ill-concealed anger, he gave a grudging assent to the proposition to return to Swatley Cove.

Thus, whilst on the surface the "Sea Spray" was steaming full speed for Dover Harbour, below, the "Black Barnacle" shaped its course for Swatley Cove.

Blake was landed just in time to catch the mail boat to London. He at once hurried to

see Muriel Lane. He found the address she had given him to be in a shabby-genteel "terrace" of monotonous stucco-fronted little houses, in one of the cheapest suburbs. When he reached the house she had directed him to, he found it empty. An untidy litter of straw and old newspaper upon the doorstep showed him plainly that its late occupants had only just departed, whilst the dusty windows and the walls were still placarded with auctioneers' notices of a sale that had taken place that morning.

So it had come to this! He was too late—too late! He was disappointed—bitterly disappointed. He somehow felt that a great cloud had suddenly come over his life.

But why should he lose heart? The case was not done with yet. No doubt he would be given the charge of it by Government. Already it was the chief theme of the newspapers; and, besides, he had much to occupy him. Many new interesting cases were, no doubt, awaiting him as soon as he reported himself at the "Yard." Why should he mind, then, just because an old man whom he had never seen was sold up? He had seen scores of such cases before.

And yet, battle against it as he would, he could not fight down the picture of poor little Muriel, of her grief, of what he knew it must have meant to her. And he had failed to avert it. What must she think of him? Where was she now, he wondered.

"Oh, pshaw!" he half exclaimed. "I have no patience with myself. I've a thousand and one things to do without searching out every girl whose father has gone snash. But still, I think I'll just inquire where they've gone; they may wish me to go on with the case."

After some difficulty Blake learnt from a neighbour the address to which old Captain Lane had moved. He went to the place indicated—a shabby apartment over a little general shop in a dirty side street.

He found Captain Lane the picture of dejection—a venerable old man in seedy threadbare clothes, sitting with his elbows on the table, and his face in his hands. He looked up with a weary frown as Blake entered, and asked abruptly who he was, and what he wanted.

When he heard Blake's name, he tottered to his feet, and stood supporting himself by the table in uncontrollable anger.

"You scoundrel!" he half whimpered, half shrieked. "You miserable cur! Where is my daughter? What have you done with her? Restore her to me at once. Do you hear, sir! Don't stand there in your mock innocence! Tell me where she is! Tell me—tell me!" And he sank back again into his chair, and burying his face in his hands, rocked himself to and fro in a frenzy of grief.

"Really, sir," said Blake in a kind, though firm tone; "I think there is some misunderstanding. I do not know where your daughter is; in fact, I came here now to inquire for her and see whether I could be of any service to you both."

"It is a lie!" cried the old man. "Was it not enough that I should be robbed of everything, be turned an outcast and a beggar in my old age, without your stealing my daughter—my poor little Muriel; my only hope and consolation? You robbed me of her! You know it! You persuaded her to desert me—you! you! to desert me in my affliction, and leave me when I most needed her love and comfort. You did it with your false promises! Oh, my child! my child! where are you? Why did you not trust your own old father before strangers? He may be poor and old and helpless—but oh! he loves you!" And the old man gave way to heart-rending sobs.

It was a terribly pathetic sight, and Blake was deeply moved at Captain Lane's sorrow. By degrees he comforted him, and explained all that he knew.

Then anger at Blake gave way to the wildest anxiety for his daughter. She had said that she had an appointment to meet Blake at Swatley Cove, and had gone that morning early, since when the poor old man had not seen her. In her absence his home had been sold over his head, and now he was starving—absolutely starving.

In a moment Blake saw the whole thing; Muriel had misconstrued his parting words, and thought that he wished her to meet him at Swatley Cove. She was, no doubt, there now, and oh! what a bitter disappointment it would be to her to find that he had broken faith with her.

He must go there at once, without the loss of a single moment. But first his kind thoughtfulness prompted him to see to the old man's immediate wants. He saw his landlady, and, leaving some money in her charge, told her to see that he had all he needed, and also left five pounds in Captain Lane's own keeping—under the justifiable deception that it was a small instalment of the compensation which the Admiralty were going to pay for the loss of the plans. For old Captain Lane's high sense of honour was such that he would rather have starved than become the recipient of charity.

And so Blake started. That evening he was once more back in Swatley Cove. In so small a place he had no difficulty in finding where Muriel had put up; but she had disappeared!

She had arrived in the forenoon, had left her hand-bag, and ordered a cup of tea to be ready for her at one o'clock. Then she had gone out and never been seen since. It was now late, and there were no signs of her.

The motherly old sailor's wife at whose cottage she had taken a room had grown alarmed about her, and had instituted inquiries for her. But no trace could be found of her. A party had already been out to search for her—but in vain! The railway authorities were certain she had not returned to town.

She had simply disappeared like a shadow. Although the whole of the little fishing village were up the greater part of the night scouring the country and hunting along the coast for some clue to her whereabouts, they met with no success. And in the small hours of the morning Blake was reluctantly forced to admit that the task of finding her was hopeless. Her disappearance was as complete as it was inexplicable.

As the early summer dawn was just beginning to show a streak along the eastern horizon, Blake hired a boat to row him along the coast, that he might leave no effort neglected to find Muriel.

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But let us return and watch Muriel's movements earlier in the day. When she left her temporary abode, she hastened to the cottage at which Blake had put up on the occasion of her first visit, and inquired for him. On the beach opposite stood a rough-looking Irish sailor, garrulously chattering with several of the inhabitants of the place.

This was none other than Michael Sweeney, who had just arrived in the "Black Barnacle," and had come ashore to find out how much the people of Swatley Cove know of the real explanation of the "Devil's Lamp."

As Muriel turned away, sick at heart and disappointed at hearing that no tidings had been received of Sexton Blake, Michael pricked up his ears. Rolling up to Muriel, and, touching his jersey cap respectfully, he said:

"Was it Mither Sexton Blake I heard ye inquire afther? axin' pardon for overhearin'; that is, if ye'll not take offence, miss."

"Oh, do you know anything of him?" exclaimed Muriel, in eager excitement.

"Sure, then, miss," replied Sweeney, "and who should, if it wasn't your obedient servant? Faith, it's not twinty minutes since his honour passed the time o' day with me."

"Has he arrived, then? Is he here? Where is he?" queried Muriel breathlessly.

"It's himself that's just arrived," rejoined Michael; "and he's a-settin' on the cliffs readin' some sort av a book."

"You are sure you're not mistaken?"

"Be jabbers, now, miss, and how should I be? Wasn't it meself that used to take him for a row every mortal day he was down here? When I come along, sure, he says to me, lookin' up, you'll understand, 'Why, Pat,' ses he, meanin' meself, which me name is P'athrick O'Dough; 'Pat,' ses he, 'how are you, at all?' 'Good morrow, yer honour,' ses I; 'I was feelin' main queer just now,' ses I; 'but, sure, the sight o' yerself has cured me entirely, thankin' ye kindly.' And at that he laughed, and he ses, 'Have a drop o' the bratur, Paddy,' and I answered, howin' polite, for sure I know how to behave myself, I ses 'Wid all my heart,' and he outs with his flask and we have a drink."

Muriel listened to all this Celtic oratory with impatience.

"Would you kindly tell me where he is?"

"Sure, it's meself, missie," replied Michael, "that's jest goin' past the very spot, and it's a proud man I'll be if yer'll honour me wid yer company so far."

"Thank you so much!" And she joyfully set forth. Her companion had to walk his fastest to keep pace with her eager steps.

Out to a lonely, wild district the Irishman led his fair prey, until they reached a point where even at low water the sea surged against the sides of the cliffs; and, as she looked down from the giddy height, Muriel shuddered.

"Oh, please don't let us go so near the edge!" she exclaimed, in momentary apprehension.

"Och, sure, missie, is it afraid ye are, at all? We've got to get down this old 'white wall' to that ledge below," replied Sweeney. "It's there that his honour's waitin' to see your swate face, and a purty surprise it'll be for him!"

"What?" cried Muriel, in alarm. "Climb down the side of the cliff—I couldn't!" She looked at Sweeney, and a certain threateningly-insolent look about him made her gasp a half-suppressed "Oh!" and retreat a step backwards.

There they stood, these two alone, face to face on the brink of that awful precipice, behind and around them a vast waste of wild moorland, before them the sheer descent to the angry sea, which stretched out like a sheet of unruffled glass as far as the eye could see.

Muriel realised at a glance her perilous position, and her mind was tortured with dread and presentiment. These few seconds when she realised her loneliness, awaiting Sweeney's reply, seemed to her a lifetime.

He, meanwhile, was rapidly considering his best course. It was but a momentary pause, and then he said, half reproachfully:

"Sure, ye're not afraid of me, missie? Bless yer purty face, I'd sooner lose my life than let ye lose one hair of yer swate head—be jabbers, I would!"

As he spoke, he sprang forward, as though to clasp Muriel in his arms.

With a shriek she shrank back.

"Don't, don't!" she cried.

But the only answers to her cry were the wild call of a frightened gull and the distant thunder of the surf below.

"Be aisy now, me beauty!" said Sweeney, in an ominous tone. "Ye've got to go down this cliff, and it's meself that's goin' wid ye;" and he sprang forward as he spoke, and caught her roughly in his powerful arms.

She shrieked aloud, and struggled to free herself. On the very brink of that awful cliff they swayed to and fro, hanging, as it seemed, 'twixt sky and sea.

(To be continued next Thursday.)
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