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**The Frozen Deep**

**By**

**Wilkie Collins**

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## **First Scene--The Ball-room**

### **Chapter 1.**

The date is between twenty and thirty years ago. The place is an English sea-port. The time is night. And the business of the moment is--dancing.

The Mayor and Corporation of the town are giving a grand ball, in celebration of the departure of an Arctic expedition from their port. The ships of the expedition are two in number--the Wanderer and the Sea-mew. They are to sail (in search of the Northwest Passage) on the next day, with the morning tide.

Honor to the Mayor and Corporation! It is a brilliant ball. The band is complete. The room is spacious. The large conservatory opening out of it is pleasantly lighted with Chinese lanterns, and beautifully decorated with shrubs and flowers. All officers of the army and navy who are present wear their uniforms in honor of the occasion. Among the ladies, the display of dresses (a subject which the men don't understand) is bewildering--and the average of beauty (a subject which the men do understand) is the highest average attainable, in all parts of the room.

For the moment, the dance which is in progress is a quadrille. General admiration selects two of the ladies who are dancing as its favorite objects. One is a dark beauty in the prime of womanhood--the wife of First Lieutenant Crayford, of the Wanderer. The other is a young girl, pale and delicate; dressed simply in white; with no ornament on her head but her own lovely brown hair. This is Miss Clara Burnham--an orphan. She is Mrs. Crayford's dearest friend, and she is to stay with Mrs. Crayford during the lieutenant's absence in the Arctic regions. She is now dancing, with the lieutenant himself for partner, and with Mrs. Crayford and Captain Holding (commanding officer of the Wanderer) for vis-a-vis--in plain English, for opposite couple.

The conversation between Captain Holding and Mrs. Crayford, in one of the intervals of the dance, turns on Miss Burnham. The captain is greatly interested in Clara. He admires her beauty; but he thinks her manner--for a young girl--strangely serious and subdued. Is she in delicate health?

Mrs. Crayford shakes her head; sighs mysteriously; and answers,

"In very delicate health, Captain Holding."

"Consumptive?"

"Not in the least."

"I am glad to hear that. She is a charming creature, Mrs. Crayford. She interests me indescribably. If I was only twenty years younger--perhaps (as I am not twenty years younger) I had better not finish the sentence? Is it indiscreet, my dear lady, to inquire what is the matter with her?"

"It might be indiscreet, on the part of a stranger," said Mrs. Crayford. "An old friend like you may make any inquiries. I wish I could tell you what is the matter with Clara. It is a mystery to the doctors themselves. Some of the mischief is due, in my humble opinion, to the manner in which she has been brought up."

"Ay! ay! A bad school, I suppose."

"Very bad, Captain Holding. But not the sort of school which you have in your mind at this moment. Clara's early years were spent in a lonely old house in the Highlands of Scotland. The ignorant people about her were the people who did the mischief which I have just been speaking of. They filled her mind with the superstitions which are still respected as truths in the wild North--especially the superstition called the Second Sight."

"God bless me!" cried the captain, "you don't mean to say she believes in such stuff as that? In these enlightened times too!"

Mrs. Crayford looked at her partner with a satirical smile.

"In these enlightened times, Captain Holding, we only believe in dancing tables, and in messages sent from the other world by spirits who can't spell! By comparison with such superstitions as these, even the Second Sight has something--in the shape of poetry--to recommend it, surely? Estimate for yourself," she continued seriously, "the effect of such surroundings as I have described on a delicate, sensitive young creature--a girl with a naturally imaginative temperament leading a lonely, neglected life. Is it so very surprising that she should catch the infection of the superstition about her? And is it quite incomprehensible that her nervous system should suffer accordingly, at a very critical period of her life?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Crayford--not at all, ma'am, as you put it. Still it is a little startling, to a commonplace man like me, to meet a young lady at a ball who believes in the Second Sight. Does she really profess to see into the future? Am I to understand that she positively falls into a trance, and sees people in distant countries, and foretells events to come? That is the Second Sight, is it not?"

"That is the Second Sight, captain. And that is, really and positively, what she does."

"The young lady who is dancing opposite to us?"

"The young lady who is dancing opposite to us."

The captain waited a little--letting the new flood of information which had poured in on him settle itself steadily in his mind. This process accomplished, the Arctic explorer proceeded resolutely on his way to further discoveries.

"May I ask, ma'am, if you have ever seen her in a state of trance with your own eyes?" he inquired.

"My sister and I both saw her in the trance, little more than a month since," Mrs. Crayford replied. "She had been nervous and irritable all the morning; and we took her out into the garden to breathe the fresh air. Suddenly, without any reason for it, the color left her face. She stood between us, insensible to touch, insensible to sound; motionless as stone, and cold as death in a moment. The first change we noticed came after a lapse of some minutes. Her hands began to move slowly, as if she was groping in the dark. Words dropped one by one from her lips, in a lost, vacant tone, as if she was talking in her sleep. Whether what she said referred to past or future I cannot tell you. She spoke of persons in a foreign country--perfect strangers to my sister and to me. After a little interval, she suddenly became silent. A momentary color appeared in her face, and left it again. Her eyes closed--her feet failed her--and she sank insensible into our arms."

"Sank insensible into your arms," repeated the captain, absorbing his new information. "Most extraordinary! And--in this state of health--she goes out to parties, and dances. More extraordinary still!"

"You are entirely mistaken," said Mrs. Crayford. "She is only here to-night to please me; and she is only dancing to please my husband. As a rule, she shuns all society. The doctor recommends change and amusement for her."

She won't listen to him. Except on rare occasions like this, she persists in remaining at home."

Captain Holding brightened at the allusion to the doctor. Something practical might be got out of the doctor. Scientific man. Sure to see this very obscure subject under a new light. "How does it strike the doctor now?" said the captain. "Viewed simply as a Case, ma'am, how does it strike the doctor?"

"He will give no positive opinion," Mrs. Crayford answered. "He told me that such cases as Clara's were by no means unfamiliar to medical practice. 'We know,' he told me, 'that certain disordered conditions of the brain and the nervous system produce results quite as extraordinary as any that you have described--and there our knowledge ends. Neither my science nor any man's science can clear up the mystery in this case. It is an especially difficult case to deal with, because Miss Burnham's early associations dispose her to attach a superstitious importance to the malady--the hysterical malady as some doctors would call it--from which she suffers. I can give you instructions for preserving her general health; and I can recommend you to try some change in her life--provided you first relieve her mind of any secret anxieties that may possibly be preying on it.'"

The captain smiled self-approvingly. The doctor had justified his anticipations. The doctor had suggested a practical solution of the difficulty.

"Ay! ay! At last we have hit the nail on the head! Secret anxieties. Yes! yes! Plain enough now. A disappointment in love--eh, Mrs. Crayford?"

"I don't know, Captain Holding; I am quite in the dark. Clara's confidence in me--in other matters unbounded--is, in this matter of her (supposed) anxieties, a confidence still withheld. In all else we are like sisters. I sometimes fear there may indeed be some trouble preying secretly on her mind. I sometimes feel a little hurt at her incomprehensible silence."

Captain Holding was ready with his own practical remedy for this difficulty.

"Encouragement is all she wants, ma'am. Take my word for it, this matter rests entirely with you. It's all in a nutshell. Encourage her to confide in you--and she will confide."

"I am waiting to encourage her, captain, until she is left alone with me--after you have all sailed for the Arctic seas. In the meantime, will you consider what I have said to you as intended for your ear only? And will you forgive

me, if I own that the turn the subject has taken does not tempt me to pursue it any further?"

The captain took the hint. He instantly changed the subject; choosing, on this occasion, safe professional topics. He spoke of ships that were ordered on foreign service; and, finding that these as subjects failed to interest Mrs. Crayford, he spoke next of ships that were ordered home again. This last experiment produced its effect--an effect which the captain had not bargained for.

"Do you know," he began, "that the Atalanta is expected back from the West Coast of Africa every day? Have you any acquaintances among the officers of that ship?"

As it so happened, he put those questions to Mrs. Crayford while they were engaged in one of the figures of the dance which brought them within hearing of the opposite couple. At the same moment--to the astonishment of her friends and admirers--Miss Clara Burnham threw the quadrille into confusion by making a mistake! Everybody waited to see her set the mistake right. She made no attempt to set it right--she turned deadly pale and caught her partner by the arm.

"The heat!" she said, faintly. "Take me away--take me into the air!"

Lieutenant Crayford instantly led her out of the dance, and took her into the cool and empty conservatory, at the end of the room. As a matter of course, Captain Helling and Mrs. Crayford left the quadrille at the same time. The captain saw his way to a joke.

"Is this the trance coming on?" he whispered. "If it is, as commander of the Arctic expedition, I have a particular request to make. Will the Second Sight oblige me by seeing the shortest way to the Northwest Passage, before we leave England?"

Mrs. Crayford declined to humor the joke. "If you will excuse my leaving you," she said quietly, "I will try and find out what is the matter with Miss Burnham."

At the entrance to the conservatory, Mrs. Crayford encountered her husband. The lieutenant was of middle age, tall and comely. A man with a winning simplicity and gentleness in his manner, and an irresistible kindness in his brave blue eyes. In one word, a man whom everybody loved--including his wife.

"Don't be alarmed," said the lieutenant. "The heat has overcome her--that's all."

Mrs. Crayford shook her head, and looked at her husband, half satirically, half fondly.

"You dear old innocent!" she exclaimed, "that excuse may do for you. For my part, I don't believe a word of it. Go and get another partner, and leave Clara to me."

She entered the conservatory and seated herself by Clara's side.