

## **Chapter 2.**

"Now, my dear!" Mrs. Crayford began, "what does this mean?"

"Nothing."

"That won't do, Clara. Try again."

"The heat of the room--"

"That won't do, either. Say that you choose to keep your own secrets, and I shall understand what you mean."

Clara's sad, clear gray eyes looked up for the first time in Mrs. Crayford's face, and suddenly became dimmed with tears.

"If I only dared tell you!" she murmured. "I hold so to your good opinion of me, Lucy--and I am so afraid of losing it."

Mrs. Crayford's manner changed. Her eyes rested gravely and anxiously on Clara's face.

"You know as well as I do that nothing can shake my affection for you," she said. "Do justice, my child, to your old friend. There is nobody here to listen to what we say. Open your heart, Clara. I see you are in trouble, and I want to comfort you."

Clara began to yield. In other words, she began to make conditions.

"Will you promise to keep what I tell you a secret from every living creature?" she began.

Mrs. Crayford met that question, by putting a question on her side.

"Does 'every living creature' include my husband?"

"Your husband more than anybody! I love him, I revere him. He is so noble; he is so good! If I told him what I am going to tell you, he would despise me. Own it plainly, Lucy, if I am asking too much in asking you to keep a secret from your husband."

"Nonsense, child! When you are married, you will know that the easiest of all secrets to keep is a secret from your husband. I give you my promise. Now begin!"

Clara hesitated painfully.

"I don't know how to begin!" she exclaimed, with a burst of despair. "The words won't come to me."

"Then I must help you. Do you feel ill tonight? Do you feel as you felt that day when you were with my sister and me in the garden?"

"Oh no."

"You are not ill, you are not really affected by the heat--and yet you turn as pale as ashes, and you are obliged to leave the quadrille! There must be some reason for this."

"There is a reason. Captain Holding--"

"Captain Holding! What in the name of wonder has the captain to do with it?"

"He told you something about the Atalanta. He said the Atalanta was expected back from Africa immediately."

"Well, and what of that? Is there anybody in whom you are interested coming home in the ship?"

"Somebody whom I am afraid of is coming home in the ship."

Mrs. Crayford's magnificent black eyes opened wide in amazement.

"My dear Clara! do you really mean what you say?"

"Wait a little, Lucy, and you shall judge for yourself. We must go back--if I am to make you understand me--to the year before we knew each other--to the last year of my father's life. Did I ever tell you that my father moved southward, for the sake of his health, to a house in Kent that was lent to him by a friend?"

"No, my dear; I don't remember ever hearing of the house in Kent. Tell me about it."

"There is nothing to tell, except this: the new house was near a fine country-seat standing in its own park. The owner of the place was a gentleman named Wardour. He, too, was one of my father's Kentish friends. He had an only son."

She paused, and played nervously with her fan. Mrs. Crayford looked at her attentively. Clara's eyes remained fixed on her fan--Clara said no more.

"What was the son's name?" asked Mrs. Crayford, quietly.

"Richard."

"Am I right, Clara, in suspecting that Mr. Richard Wardour admired you?"

The question produced its intended effect. The question helped Clara to go on.

"I hardly knew at first," she said, "whether he admired me or not. He was very strange in his ways--headstrong, terribly headstrong and passionate; but generous and affectionate in spite of his faults of temper. Can you understand such a character?"

"Such characters exist by thousands. I have my faults of temper. I begin to like Richard already. Go on."

"The days went by, Lucy, and the weeks went by. We were thrown very much together. I began, little by little, to have some suspicion of the truth."

"And Richard helped to confirm your suspicions, of course?"

"No. He was not--unhappily for me--he was not that sort of man. He never spoke of the feeling with which he regarded me. It was I who saw it. I couldn't help seeing it. I did all I could to show that I was willing to be a sister to him, and that I could never be anything else. He did not understand me, or he would not, I can't say which."

"'Would not,' is the most likely, my dear. Go on."

"It might have been as you say. There was a strange, rough bashfulness about him. He confused and puzzled me. He never spoke out. He seemed to treat me as if our future lives had been provided for while we were children. What could I do, Lucy?"

"Do? You could have asked your father to end the difficulty for you."

"Impossible! You forget what I have just told you. My father was suffering at that time under the illness which afterward caused his death. He was quite unfit to interfere."

"Was there no one else who could help you?"

"No one."

"No lady in whom you could confide?"

"I had acquaintances among the ladies in the neighborhood. I had no friends."

"What did you do, then?"

"Nothing. I hesitated; I put off coming to an explanation with him, unfortunately, until it was too late."

"What do you mean by too late?"

"You shall hear. I ought to have told you that Richard Wardour is in the navy--"

"Indeed! I am more interested in him than ever. Well?"

"One spring day Richard came to our house to take leave of us before he joined his ship. I thought he was gone, and I went into the next room. It was my own sitting-room, and it opened on to the garden."--

"Yes?"

"Richard must have been watching me. He suddenly appeared in the garden. Without waiting for me to invite him, he walked into the room. I was a little startled as well as surprised, but I managed to hide it. I said, 'What is it, Mr. Wardour?' He stepped close up to me; he said, in his quick, rough way: 'Clara! I am going to the African coast. If I live, I shall come back promoted; and we both know what will happen then.' He kissed me. I was half frightened, half angry. Before I could compose myself to say a word, he was out in the garden again--he was gone! I ought to have spoken, I know. It was not honorable, not kind toward him. You can't reproach me for my want of courage and frankness more bitterly than I reproach myself!"

"My dear child, I don't reproach you. I only think you might have written to him."

"I did write."

"Plainly?"

"Yes. I told him in so many words that he was deceiving himself, and that I could never marry him."

"Plain enough, in all conscience! Having said that, surely you are not to blame. What are you fretting about now?"

"Suppose my letter has never reached him?"

"Why should you suppose anything of the sort?"

"What I wrote required an answer, Lucy--asked for an answer. The answer has never come. What is the plain conclusion? My letter has never reached him. And the Atalanta is expected back! Richard Wardour is returning to England--Richard Wardour will claim me as his wife! You wondered just now if I really meant what I said. Do you doubt it still?"

Mrs. Crayford leaned back absently in her chair. For the first time since the conversation had begun, she let a question pass without making a reply. The truth is, Mrs. Crayford was thinking.

She saw Clara's position plainly; she understood the disturbing effect of it on the mind of a young girl. Still, making all allowances, she felt quite at a loss, so far, to account for Clara's excessive agitation. Her quick observing faculty had just detected that Clara's face showed no signs of relief, now that she had unburdened herself of her secret. There was something clearly under the surface here--something of importance that still remained to be discovered. A shrewd doubt crossed Mrs. Crayford's mind, and inspired the next words which she addressed to her young friend.

"My dear," she said abruptly, "have you told me all?"

Clara started as if the question terrified her. Feeling sure that she now had the clew in her hand, Mrs. Crayford deliberately repeated her question, in another form of words. Instead of answering, Clara suddenly looked up. At the same moment a faint flush of color appeared in her face for the first

time.

Looking up instinctively on her side, Mrs. Crayford became aware of the presence, in the conservatory, of a young gentleman who was claiming Clara as his partner in the coming waltz. Mrs. Crayford fell into thinking once more. Had this young gentleman (she asked herself) anything to do with the untold end of the story? Was this the true secret of Clara Burnham's terror at the impending return of Richard Wardour? Mrs. Crayford decided on putting her doubts to the test.

"A friend of yours, my dear?" she asked, innocently. "Suppose you introduce us to each other."

Clara confusedly introduced the young gentleman.

"Mr. Francis Aldersley, Lucy. Mr. Aldersley belongs to the Arctic expedition."

"Attached to the expedition?" Mrs. Crayford repeated. "I am attached to the expedition too--in my way. I had better introduce myself, Mr. Aldersley, as Clara seems to have forgotten to do it for me. I am Mrs. Crayford. My husband is Lieutenant Crayford, of the Wanderer. Do you belong to that ship?"

"I have not the honor, Mrs. Crayford. I belong to the Sea-mew."

Mrs. Crayford's superb eyes looked shrewdly backward and forward between Clara and Francis Aldersley, and saw the untold sequel to Clara's story. The young officer was a bright, handsome, gentleman-like lad. Just the person to seriously complicate the difficulty with Richard Wardour! There was no time for making any further inquiries. The band had begun the prelude to the waltz, and Francis Aldersley was waiting for his partner. With a word of apology to the young man, Mrs. Crayford drew Clara aside for a moment, and spoke to her in a whisper.

"One word, my dear, before you return to the ball-room. It may sound conceited, after the little you have told me; but I think I understand your position now, better than you do yourself. Do you want to hear my opinion?"

"I am longing to hear it, Lucy! I want your opinion; I want your advice."

"You shall have both in the plainest and fewest words. First, my opinion: You have no choice but to come to an explanation with Mr. Wardour as soon as he returns. Second, my advice: If you wish to make the explanation easy

to both sides, take care that you make it in the character of a free woman."

She laid a strong emphasis on the last three words, and looked pointedly at Francis Aldersley as she pronounced them. "I won't keep you from your partner any longer, Clara," she resumed, and led the way back to the ball-room.