

### **Chapter 3.**

The burden on Clara's mind weighs on it more heavily than ever, after what Mrs. Crayford has said to her. She is too unhappy to feel the inspiriting influence of the dance. After a turn round the room, she complains of fatigue. Mr. Francis Aldersley looks at the conservatory (still as invitingly cool and empty as ever); leads her back to it; and places her on a seat among the shrubs. She tries--very feebly--to dismiss him.

"Don't let me keep you from dancing, Mr. Aldersley."

He seats himself by her side, and feasts his eyes on the lovely downcast face that dares not turn toward him. He whispers to her:

"Call me Frank."

She longs to call him Frank--she loves him with all her heart. But Mrs. Crayford's warning words are still in her mind. She never opens her lips. Her lover moves a little closer, and asks another favor. Men are all alike on these occasions. Silence invariably encourages them to try again.

"Clara! have you forgotten what I said at the concert yesterday? May I say it again?"

"No!"

"We sail to-morrow for the Arctic seas. I may not return for years. Don't send me away without hope! Think of the long, lonely time in the dark North! Make it a happy time for me."

Though he speaks with the fervor of a man, he is little more than a lad: he is only twenty years old, and he is going to risk his young life on the frozen deep! Clara pities him as she never pitied any human creature before. He gently takes her hand. She tries to release it.

"What! not even that little favor on the last night?"

Her faithful heart takes his part, in spite of her. Her hand remains in his, and feels its soft persuasive pressure. She is a lost woman. It is only a question of time now!

"Clara! do you love me?"

There is a pause. She shrinks from looking at him--she trembles with strange contradictory sensations of pleasure and pain. His arm steals round her; he repeats his question in a whisper; his lips almost touch her little rosy ear as he says it again:

"Do you love me?"

She closes her eyes faintly--she hears nothing but those words--feels nothing but his arm round her--forgets Mrs. Crayford's warning--forgets Richard Wardour himself--turns suddenly, with a loving woman's desperate disregard of everything but her love--nestles her head on his bosom, and answers him in that way, at last!

He lifts the beautiful drooping head--their lips meet in their first kiss--they are both in heaven: it is Clara who brings them back to earth again with a start--it is Clara who says, "Oh! what have I done?"--as usual, when it is too late.

Frank answers the question.

"You have made me happy, my angel. Now, when I come back, I come back to make you my wife."

She shudders. She remembers Richard Wardour again at those words.

"Mind!" she says, "nobody is to know we are engaged till I permit you to mention it. Remember that!"

He promises to remember it. His arm tries to wind round her once more. No! She is mistress of herself; she can positively dismiss him now--after she has let him kiss her!

"Go!" she says. "I want to see Mrs. Crayford. Find her! Say I am here, waiting to speak to her. Go at once, Frank--for my sake!"

There is no alternative but to obey her. His eyes drink a last draught of her beauty. He hurries away on his errand--the happiest man in the room. Five minutes since she was only his partner in the dance. He has spoken--and she has pledged herself to be his partner for life!