

Chapter 4.

It was not easy to find Mrs. Crayford in the crowd. Searching here, and searching there, Frank became conscious of a stranger, who appeared to be looking for somebody, on his side. He was a dark, heavy-browed, strongly-built man, dressed in a shabby old naval officer's uniform. His manner--strikingly resolute and self-contained--was unmistakably the manner of a gentleman. He wound his way slowly through the crowd; stopping to look at every lady whom he passed, and then looking away again with a frown. Little by little he approached the conservatory--entered it, after a moment's reflection--detected the glimmer of a white dress in the distance, through the shrubs and flowers--advanced to get a nearer view of the lady--and burst into Clara's presence with a cry of delight.

She sprang to her feet. She stood before him speechless, motionless, struck to stone. All her life was in her eyes--the eyes which told her she was looking at Richard Wardour.

He was the first to speak.

"I am sorry I startled you, my darling. I forgot everything but the happiness of seeing you again. We only reached our moorings two hours since. I was some time inquiring after you, and some time getting my ticket when they told me you were at the ball. Wish me joy, Clara! I am promoted. I have come back to make you my wife."

A momentary change passed over the blank terror of her face. Her color rose faintly, her lips moved. She abruptly put a question to him.

"Did you get my letter?"

He started. "A letter from you? I never received it."

The momentary animation died out of her face again. She drew back from him and dropped into a chair. He advanced toward her, astonished and alarmed. She shrank in the chair--shrank, as if she was frightened of him.

"Clara, you have not even shaken hands with me! What does it mean?"

He paused; waiting and watching her. She made no reply. A flash of the quick temper in him leaped up in his eyes. He repeated his last words in

louder and sterner tones:

"What does it mean?"

She replied this time. His tone had hurt her--his tone had roused her sinking courage.

"It means, Mr. Wardour, that you have been mistaken from the first."

"How have I been mistaken?"

"You have been under a wrong impression, and you have given me no opportunity of setting you right."

"In what way have I been wrong?"

"You have been too hasty and too confident about yourself and about me. You have entirely misunderstood me. I am grieved to distress you, but for your sake I must speak plainly. I am your friend always, Mr. Wardour. I can never be your wife."

He mechanically repeated the last words. He seemed to doubt whether he had heard her aright.

"You can never be my wife?"

"Never!"

"Why?"

There was no answer. She was incapable of telling him a falsehood. She was ashamed to tell him the truth.

He stooped over her, and suddenly possessed himself of her hand. Holding her hand firmly, he stooped a little lower; searching for the signs which might answer him in her face. His own face darkened slowly while he looked. He was beginning to suspect her; and he acknowledged it in his next words.

"Something has changed you toward me, Clara. Somebody has influenced you against me. Is it--you force me to ask the question--is it some other man?"

"You have no right to ask me that."

He went on without noticing what she had said to him.

"Has that other man come between you and me? I speak plainly on my side. Speak plainly on yours."

"I have spoken. I have nothing more to say."

There was a pause. She saw the warning light which told of the fire within him, growing brighter and brighter in his eyes. She felt his grasp strengthening on her hand. He appealed to her for the last time.

"Reflect," he said, "reflect before it is too late. Your silence will not serve you. If you persist in not answering me, I shall take your silence as a confession. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Clara Burnham! I am not to be trifled with. Clara Burnham! I insist on the truth. Are you false to me?"

She resented that searching question with a woman's keen sense of the insult that is implied in doubting her to her face.

"Mr. Wardour! you forget yourself when you call me to account in that way. I never encouraged you. I never gave you promise or pledge--"

He passionately interrupted her before she could say more.

"You have engaged yourself in my absence. Your words own it; your looks own it! You have engaged yourself to another man!"

"If I have engaged myself, what right have you to complain of it?" she answered firmly. "What right have you to control my actions--?"

The next words died away on her lips. He suddenly dropped her hand. A marked change appeared in the expression of his eyes--a change which told her of the terrible passions that she had let loose in him. She read, dimly read, something in his face which made her tremble--not for herself, but for Frank.

Little by little the dark color faded out of his face. His deep voice dropped suddenly to a low and quiet tone as he spoke the parting words.

"Say no more, Miss Burnham--you have said enough. I am answered; I am dismissed." He paused, and, stepping close up to her, laid his hand on her arm.

"The time may come," he said, "when I shall forgive you. But the man who has robbed me of you shall rue the day when you and he first met."

He turned and left her.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Crayford, entering the conservatory, was met by one of the attendants at the ball. The man stopped as if he wished to speak to her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. Do you happen to have a smelling-bottle about you? There is a young lady in the conservatory who is taken faint."

Between the Scenes--The Landing Stage