

## **Chapter 8.**

The sailor on watch opened the outer door. There, plodding over the ghastly white snow, were the officers of the Wanderer approaching the hut. There, scattered under the merciless black sky, were the crew, with the dogs and the sledges, waiting the word which was to start them on their perilous and doubtful journey.

Captain Holding of the Wanderer, accompanied by his officers, entered the hut, in high spirits at the prospect of a change. Behind them, lounging in slowly by himself, was a dark, sullen, heavy-browed man. He neither spoke, nor offered his hand to anybody: he was the one person present who seemed to be perfectly indifferent to the fate in store for him. This was the man whom his brother officers had nicknamed the Bear of the Expedition. In other words--Richard Wardour.

Crayford advanced to welcome Captain Holding. Frank, remembering the friendly reproof which he had just received, passed over the other officers of the Wanderer, and made a special effort to be civil to Crayford's friend.

"Good-morning, Mr. Wardour," he said. "We may congratulate each other on the chance of leaving this horrible place."

"You may think it horrible," Wardour retorted; "I like it."

"Like it? Good Heavens! why?"

"Because there are no women here."

Frank turned to his brother officers, without making any further advances in the direction of Richard Wardour. The Bear of the Expedition was more unapproachable than ever.

In the meantime, the hut had become thronged by the able-bodied officers and men of the two ships. Captain Holding, standing in the midst of them, with Crayford by his side, proceeded to explain the purpose of the contemplated expedition to the audience which surrounded him.

He began in these words:

"Brother officers and men of the Wanderer and Sea-mew, it is my duty to tell

you, very briefly, the reasons which have decided Captain Ebsworth and myself on dispatching an exploring party in search of help. Without recalling all the hardships we have suffered for the last two years--the destruction, first of one of our ships, then of the other; the death of some of our bravest and best companions; the vain battles we have been fighting with the ice and snow, and boundless desolation of these inhospitable regions--without dwelling on these things, it is my duty to remind you that this, the last place in which we have taken refuge, is far beyond the track of any previous expedition, and that consequently our chance of being discovered by any rescuing parties that may be sent to look after us is, to say the least of it, a chance of the most uncertain kind. You all agree with me, gentlemen, so far?"

The officers (with the exception of Wardour, who stood apart in sullen silence) all agreed, so far.

The captain went on.

"It is therefore urgently necessary that we should make another, and probably a last, effort to extricate ourselves. The winter is not far off, game is getting scarcer and scarcer, our stock of provisions is running low, and the sick--especially, I am sorry to say, the sick in the Wanderer's hut--are increasing in number day by day. We must look to our own lives, and to the lives of those who are dependent on us; and we have no time to lose."

The officers echoed the words cheerfully.

"Right! right! No time to lose."

Captain Holding resumed:

"The plan proposed is, that a detachment of the able-bodied officers and men among us should set forth this very day, and make another effort to reach the nearest inhabited settlements, from which help and provisions may be dispatched to those who remain here. The new direction to be taken, and the various precautions to be adopted, are all drawn out ready. The only question now before us is, Who is to stop here, and who is to undertake the journey?"

The officers answered the question with one accord--"Volunteers!"

The men echoed their officers. "Ay, ay, volunteers."

Wardour still preserved his sullen silence. Crayford noticed him, standing apart from the rest, and appealed to him personally.

"Do you say nothing?" he asked.

"Nothing," Wardour answered. "Go or stay, it's all one to me."

"I hope you don't really mean that?" said Crayford.

"I do."

"I am sorry to hear it, Wardour."

Captain Holding answered the general suggestion in favor of volunteering by a question which instantly checked the rising enthusiasm of the meeting.

"Well," he said, "suppose we say volunteers. Who volunteers to stop in the huts?"

There was a dead silence. The officers and men looked at each other confusedly. The captain continued:

"You see we can't settle it by volunteering. You all want to go. Every man among us who has the use of his limbs naturally wants to go. But what is to become of those who have not got the use of their limbs? Some of us must stay here, and take care of the sick."

Everybody admitted that this was true.

"So we get back again," said the captain, "to the old question--Who among the able-bodied is to go? and who is to stay? Captain Ebsworth says, and I say, let chance decide it. Here are dice. The numbers run as high as twelve--double sixes. All who throw under six, stay; all who throw over six, go. Officers of the Wanderer and the Sea-mew, do you agree to that way of meeting the difficulty?"

All the officers agreed, with the one exception of Wardour, who still kept silence.

"Men of the Wanderer and Sea-mew, your officers agree to cast lots. Do you agree too?"

The men agreed without a dissentient voice. Crayford handed the box and

the dice to Captain Holding.

"You throw first, sir. Under six, 'Stay.' Over six, 'Go.'"

Captain Holding cast the dice; the top of the cask serving for a table. He threw seven.

"Go," said Crayford. "I congratulate you, sir. Now for my own chance." He cast the dice in his turn. Three! "Stay! Ah, well! well! if I can do my duty, and be of use to others, what does it matter whether I go or stay? Wardour, you are next, in the absence of your first lieutenant."

Wardour prepared to cast, without shaking the dice.

"Shake the box, man!" cried Crayford. "Give yourself a chance of luck!"

Wardour persisted in letting the dice fall out carelessly, just as they lay in the box.

"Not I!" he muttered to himself. "I've done with luck." Saying those words, he threw down the empty box, and seated himself on the nearest chest, without looking to see how the dice had fallen.

Crayford examined them. "Six!" he exclaimed. "There! you have a second chance, in spite of yourself. You are neither under nor over--you throw again."

"Bah!" growled the Bear. "It's not worth the trouble of getting up for. Somebody else throw for me." He suddenly looked at Frank. "You! you have got what the women call a lucky face."

Frank appealed to Crayford. "Shall I?"

"Yes, if he wishes it," said Crayford.

Frank cast the dice. "Two! He stays! Wardour, I am sorry I have thrown against you."

"Go or stay," reiterated Wardour, "it's all one to me. You will be luckier, young one, when you cast for yourself."

Frank cast for himself.

"Eight. Hurrah! I go!"

"What did I tell you?" said Wardour. "The chance was yours. You have thriven on my ill luck."

He rose, as he spoke, to leave the hut. Crayford stopped him.

"Have you anything particular to do, Richard?"

"What has anybody to do here?"

"Wait a little, then. I want to speak to you when this business is over."

"Are you going to give me any more good advice?"

"Don't look at me in that sour way, Richard. I am going to ask you a question about something which concerns yourself."

Wardour yielded without a word more. He returned to his chest, and cynically composed himself to slumber. The casting of the lots went on rapidly among the officers and men. In another half-hour chance had decided the question of "Go" or "Stay" for all alike. The men left the hut. The officers entered the inner apartment for a last conference with the bed-ridden captain of the Sea-mew. Wardour and Crayford were left together, alone.