

Chapter 9.

Crayford touched his friend on the shoulder to rouse him. Wardour looked up, impatiently, with a frown.

"I was just asleep," he said. "Why do you wake me?"

"Look round you, Richard. We are alone."

"Well--and what of that?"

"I wish to speak to you privately; and this is my opportunity. You have disappointed and surprised me to-day. Why did you say it was all one to you whether you went or stayed? Why are you the only man among us who seems to be perfectly indifferent whether we are rescued or not?"

"Can a man always give a reason for what is strange in his manner or his words?" Wardour retorted.

"He can try," said Crayford, quietly--"when his friend asks him."

Wardour's manner softened.

"That's true," he said. "I will try. Do you remember the first night at sea when we sailed from England in the Wanderer?"

"As well as if it was yesterday."

"A calm, still night," the other went on, thoughtfully. "No clouds, no stars. Nothing in the sky but the broad moon, and hardly a ripple to break the path of light she made in the quiet water. Mine was the middle watch that night. You came on deck, and found me alone--"

He stopped. Crayford took his hand, and finished the sentence for him.

"Alone--and in tears."

"The last I shall ever shed," Wardour added, bitterly.

"Don't say that! There are times when a man is to be pitied indeed, if he can shed no tears. Go on, Richard."

Wardour proceeded--still following the old recollections, still preserving his gentler tones.

"I should have quarreled with any other man who had surprised me at that moment," he said. "There was something, I suppose, in your voice when you asked my pardon for disturbing me, that softened my heart. I told you I had met with a disappointment which had broken me for life. There was no need to explain further. The only hopeless wretchedness in this world is the wretchedness that women cause."

"And the only unalloyed happiness," said Crayford, "the happiness that women bring."

"That may be your experience of them," Wardour answered; "mine is different. All the devotion, the patience, the humility, the worship that there is in man, I laid at the feet of a woman. She accepted the offering as women do--accepted it, easily, gracefully, unfeelingly--accepted it as a matter of course. I left England to win a high place in my profession, before I dared to win her. I braved danger, and faced death. I staked my life in the fever swamps of Africa, to gain the promotion that I only desired for her sake--and gained it. I came back to give her all, and to ask nothing in return, but to rest my weary heart in the sunshine of her smile. And her own lips--the lips I had kissed at parting--told me that another man had robbed me of her. I spoke but few words when I heard that confession, and left her forever. 'The time may come,' I told her, 'when I shall forgive you. But the man who has robbed me of you shall rue the day when you and he first met.' Don't ask me who he was! I have yet to discover him. The treachery had been kept secret; nobody could tell me where to find him; nobody could tell me who he was. What did it matter? When I had lived out the first agony, I could rely on myself--I could be patient, and bide my time."

"Your time? What time?"

"The time when I and that man shall meet face to face. I knew it then; I know it now--it was written on my heart then, it is written on my heart now--we two shall meet and know each other! With that conviction strong within me, I volunteered for this service, as I would have volunteered for anything that set work and hardship and danger, like ramparts, between my misery and me. With that conviction strong within me still, I tell you it is no matter whether I stay here with the sick, or go hence with the strong. I shall live till I have met that man! There is a day of reckoning appointed between us. Here in the freezing cold, or away in the deadly heat; in battle or in

shipwreck; in the face of starvation; under the shadow of pestilence--I, though hundreds are falling round me, I shall live! live for the coming of one day! live for the meeting with one man!"

He stopped, trembling, body and soul, under the hold that his own terrible superstition had fastened on him. Crayford drew back in silent horror. Wardour noticed the action--he resented it--he appealed, in defense of his one cherished conviction, to Crayford's own experience of him.

"Look at me!" he cried. "Look how I have lived and thriven, with the heart-ache gnawing at me at home, and the winds of the icy north whistling round me here! I am the strongest man among you. Why? I have fought through hardships that have laid the best-seasoned men of all our party on their backs. Why? What have I done, that my life should throb as bravely through every vein in my body at this minute, and in this deadly place, as ever it did in the wholesome breezes of home? What am I preserved for? I tell you again, for the coming of one day--for the meeting with one man."

He paused once more. This time Crayford spoke.

"Richard!" he said, "since we first met, I have believed in your better nature, against all outward appearance. I have believed in you, firmly, truly, as your brother might. You are putting that belief to a hard test. If your enemy had told me that you had ever talked as you talk now, that you had ever looked as you look now, I would have turned my back on him as the utterer of a vile calumny against a just, a brave, an upright man. Oh! my friend, my friend, if ever I have deserved well of you, put away these thoughts from your heart! Face me again, with the stainless look of a man who has trampled under his feet the bloody superstitions of revenge, and knows them no more! Never, never, let the time come when I cannot offer you my hand as I offer it now, to the man I can still admire--to the brother I can still love!"

The heart that no other voice could touch felt that appeal. The fierce eyes, the hard voice, softened under Crayford's influence. Richard Wardour's head sank on his breast.

"You are kinder to me than I deserve," he said. "Be kinder still, and forget what I have been talking about. No! no more about me; I am not worth it. We'll change the subject, and never go back to it again. Let's do something. Work, Crayford--that's the true elixir of our life! Work, that stretches the muscles and sets the blood a-glowing. Work, that tires the body and rests the mind. Is there nothing in hand that I can do? Nothing to cut? nothing to carry?"

The door opened as he put the question. Bateson--appointed to chop Frank's bed-place into firing--appeared punctually with his ax. Wardour, without a word of warning, snatched the ax out of the man's hand.

"What was this wanted for?" he asked.

"To cut up Mr. Aldersley's berth there into firing, sir."

"I'll do it for you! I'll have it down in no time!" He turned to Crayford. "You needn't be afraid about me, old friend. I am going to do the right thing. I am going to tire my body and rest my mind."

The evil spirit in him was plainly subdued--for the time, at least. Crayford took his hand in silence; and then (followed by Bateson) left him to his work.