

Chapter 10.

Ax in hand, Wardour approached Frank's bed-place.

"If I could only cut the thoughts out of me," he said to himself, "as I am going to cut the billets out of this wood!" He attacked the bed-place with the ax, like a man who well knew the use of his instrument. "Oh me!" he thought, sadly, "if I had only been born a carpenter instead of a gentleman! A good ax, Master Bateson--I wonder where you got it? Something like a grip, my man, on this handle. Poor Crayford! his words stick in my throat. A fine fellow! a noble fellow! No use thinking, no use regretting; what is said, is said. Work! work! work!"

Plank after plank fell out on the floor. He laughed over the easy task of destruction. "Aha! young Aldersley! It doesn't take much to demolish your bed-place. I'll have it down! I would have the whole hut down, if they would only give me the chance of chopping at it!"

A long strip of wood fell to his ax--long enough to require cutting in two. He turned it, and stooped over it. Something caught his eye--letters carved in the wood. He looked closer. The letters were very faintly and badly cut. He could only make out the first three of them; and even of those he was not quite certain. They looked like C L A--if they looked like anything. He threw down the strip of wood irritably.

"D--n the fellow (whoever he is) who cut this! Why should he carve that name, of all the names in the world?"

He paused, considering--then determined to go on again with his self-imposed labor. He was ashamed of his own outburst. He looked eagerly for the ax. "Work, work! Nothing for it but work." He found the ax, and went on again.

He cut out another plank.

He stopped, and looked at it suspiciously.

There was carving again, on this plank. The letters F. and A. appeared on it.

He put down the ax. There were vague misgivings in him which he was not able to realize. The state of his own mind was fast becoming a puzzle to him.

"More carving," he said to himself. "That's the way these young idlers employ their long hours. F. A.? Those must be his initials--Frank Aldersley. Who carved the letters on the other plank? Frank Aldersley, too?"

He turned the piece of wood in his hand nearer to the light, and looked lower down it. More carving again, lower down! Under the initials F. A. were two more letters--C. B.

"C. B.?" he repeated to himself. "His sweet heart's initials, I suppose? Of course--at his age--his sweetheart's initials."

He paused once more. A spasm of inner pain showed the shadow of its mysterious passage, outwardly on his face.

"Her cipher is C. B.," he said, in low, broken tones. "C. B.--Clara Burnham."

He waited, with the plank in his hand; repeating the name over and over again, as if it was a question he was putting to himself.

"Clara Burnham? Clara Burnham?"

He dropped the plank, and turned deadly pale in a moment. His eyes wandered furtively backward and forward between the strip of wood on the floor and the half-demolished berth. "Oh, God! what has come to me now?" he said to himself, in a whisper. He snatched up the ax, with a strange cry--something between rage and terror. He tried--fiercely, desperately tried--to go on with his work. No! strong as he was, he could not use the ax. His hands were helpless; they trembled incessantly. He went to the fire; he held his hands over it. They still trembled incessantly; they infected the rest of him. He shuddered all over. He knew fear. His own thoughts terrified him.

"Crayford!" he cried out. "Crayford! come here, and let's go hunting."

No friendly voice answered him. No friendly face showed itself at the door.

An interval passed; and there came over him another change. He recovered his self-possession almost as suddenly as he had lost it. A smile--a horrid, deforming, unnatural smile--spread slowly, stealthily, devilishly over his face. He left the fire; he put the ax away softly in a corner; he sat down in his old place, deliberately self-abandoned to a frenzy of vindictive joy. He had found the man! There, at the end of the world--there, at the last fight of the Arctic voyagers against starvation and death, he had found the man!

The minutes passed.

He became conscious, on a sudden, of a freezing stream of air pouring into the room.

He turned, and saw Crayford opening the door of the hut. A man was behind him. Wardour rose eagerly, and looked over Crayford's shoulder.

Was it--could it be--the man who had carved the letters on the plank? Yes! Frank Aldersley!