

Chapter 11.

"Still at work!" Crayford exclaimed, looking at the half-demolished bed-place. "Give yourself a little rest, Richard. The exploring party is ready to start. If you wish to take leave of your brother officers before they go, you have no time to lose."

He checked himself there, looking Wardour full in the face.

"Good Heavens!" he cried, "how pale you are! Has anything happened?"

Frank--searching in his locker for articles of clothing which he might require on the journey--looked round. He was startled, as Crayford had been startled, by the sudden change in Wardour since they had last seen him.

"Are you ill?" he asked. "I hear you have been doing Bateson's work for him. Have you hurt yourself?"

Wardour suddenly moved his head, so as to hide his face from both Crayford and Frank. He took out his handkerchief, and wound it clumsily round his left hand.

"Yes," he said; "I hurt myself with the ax. It's nothing. Never mind. Pain always has a curious effect on me. I tell you it's nothing! Don't notice it!"

He turned his face toward them again as suddenly as he had turned it away. He advanced a few steps, and addressed himself with an uneasy familiarity to Frank.

"I didn't answer you civilly when you spoke to me some little time since. I mean when I first came in here along with the rest of them. I apologize. Shake hands! How are you? Ready for the march?"

Frank met the oddly abrupt advance which had been made to him with perfect good humor.

"I am glad to be friends with you, Mr. Wardour. I wish I was as well seasoned to fatigue as you are."

Wardour burst into a hard, joyless, unnatural laugh.

"Not strong, eh? You don't look it. The dice had better have sent me away, and kept you here. I never felt in better condition in my life." He paused and added, with his eye on Frank and with a strong emphasis on the words: "We men of Kent are made of tough material."

Frank advanced a step on his side, with a new interest in Richard Wardour.

"You come from Kent?" he said.

"Yes. From East Kent." He waited a little once more, and looked hard at Frank. "Do you know that part of the country?" he asked.

"I ought to know something about East Kent," Frank answered. "Some dear friends of mine once lived there."

"Friends of yours?" Wardour repeated. "One of the county families, I suppose?"

As he put the question, he abruptly looked over his shoulder. He was standing between Crayford and Frank. Crayford, taking no part in the conversation, had been watching him, and listening to him more and more attentively as that conversation went on. Within the last moment or two Wardour had become instinctively conscious of this. He resented Crayford's conduct with needless irritability.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asked.

"Why are you looking unlike yourself?" Crayford answered, quietly.

Wardour made no reply. He renewed the conversation with Frank.

"One of the county families?" he resumed. "The Winterbys of Yew Grange, I dare say?"

"No," said Frank; "but friends of the Witherbys, very likely. The Burnhams."

Desperately as he struggled to maintain it, Wardour's self-control failed him. He started violently. The clumsily-wound handkerchief fell off his hand. Still looking at him attentively, Crayford picked it up.

"There is your handkerchief, Richard," he said. "Strange!"

"What is strange?"

"You told us you had hurt yourself with the ax--"

"Well?"

"There is no blood on your handkerchief."

Wardour snatched the handkerchief out of Crayford's hand, and, turning away, approached the outer door of the hut. "No blood on the handkerchief," he said to himself. "There may be a stain or two when Crayford sees it again." He stopped within a few paces of the door, and spoke to Crayford. "You recommended me to take leave of my brother officers before it was too late," he said. "I am going to follow your advice."

The door was opened from the outer side as he laid his hand on the lock.

One of the quartermasters of the Wanderer entered the hut.

"Is Captain Holding here, sir?" he asked, addressing himself to Wardour.

Wardour pointed to Crayford.

"The lieutenant will tell you," he said.

Crayford advanced and questioned the quartermaster. "What do you want with Captain Holding?" he asked.

"I have a report to make, sir. There has been an accident on the ice."

"To one of your men?"

"No, sir. To one of our officers."

Wardour, on the point of going out, paused when the quartermaster made that reply. For a moment he considered with himself. Then he walked slowly back to the part of the room in which Frank was standing. Crayford, directing the quartermaster, pointed to the arched door way in the side of the hut.

"I am sorry to hear of the accident," he said. "You will find Captain Holding in that room."

For the second time, with singular persistency, Wardour renewed the

conversation with Frank.

"So you knew the Burnhams?" he said. "What became of Clara when her father died?"

Frank's face flushed angrily on the instant.

"Clara!" he repeated. "What authorizes you to speak of Miss Burnham in that familiar manner?"

Wardour seized the opportunity of quarreling with him.

"What right have you to ask?" he retorted, coarsely.

Frank's blood was up. He forgot his promise to Clara to keep their engagement secret--he forgot everything but the unbridled insolence of Wardour's language and manner.

"A right which I insist on your respecting," he answered. "The right of being engaged to marry her."

Crayford's steady eyes were still on the watch, and Wardour felt them on him. A little more and Crayford might openly interfere. Even Wardour recognized for once the necessity of controlling his temper, cost him what it might. He made his apologies, with overstrained politeness, to Frank.

"Impossible to dispute such a right as yours," he said. "Perhaps you will excuse me when you know that I am one of Miss Burnham's old friends. My father and her father were neighbors. We have always met like brother and sister--"

Frank generously stopped the apology there.

"Say no more," he interposed. "I was in the wrong--I lost my temper. Pray forgive me."

Wardour looked at him with a strange, reluctant interest while he was speaking. Wardour asked an extraordinary question when he had done.

"Is she very fond of you?"

Frank burst out laughing.

"My dear fellow," he said, "come to our wedding, and judge for yourself."

"Come to your wedding?" As he repeated the words Wardour stole one glance at Frank which Frank (employed in buckling his knapsack) failed to see. Crayford noticed it, and Crayford's blood ran cold. Comparing the words which Wardour had spoken to him while they were alone together with the words that had just passed in his presence, he could draw but one conclusion. The woman whom Wardour had loved and lost was--Clara Burnham. The man who had robbed him of her was Frank Aldersley. And Wardour had discovered it in the interval since they had last met. "Thank God!" thought Crayford, "the dice have parted them! Frank goes with the expedition, and Wardour stays behind with me."

The reflection had barely occurred to him--Frank's thoughtless invitation to Wardour had just passed his lips--when the canvas screen over the doorway was drawn aside. Captain Holding and the officers who were to leave with the exploring party returned to the main room on their way out. Seeing Crayford, Captain Holding stopped to speak to him.

"I have a casualty to report," said the captain, "which diminishes our numbers by one. My second lieutenant, who was to have joined the exploring party, has had a fall on the ice. Judging by what the quartermaster tells me, I am afraid the poor fellow has broken his leg."

"I will supply his place," cried a voice at the other end of the hut.

Everybody looked round. The man who had spoken was Richard Wardour.

Crayford instantly interfered--so vehemently as to astonish all who knew him.

"No!" he said. "Not you, Richard! not you!"

"Why not?" Wardour asked, sternly.

"Why not, indeed?" added Captain Holding. "Wardour is the very man to be useful on a long march. He is in perfect health, and he is the best shot among us. I was on the point of proposing him myself."

Crayford failed to show his customary respect for his superior officer. He openly disputed the captain's conclusion.

"Wardour has no right to volunteer," he rejoined. "It has been settled,

Captain Holding, that chance shall decide who is to go and who is to stay."

"And chance has decided it," cried Wardour. "Do you think we are going to cast the dice again, and give an officer of the Sea-mew a chance of replacing an officer of the Wanderer? There is a vacancy in our party, not in yours; and we claim the right of filling it as we please. I volunteer, and my captain backs me. Whose authority is to keep me here after that?"

"Gently, Wardour," said Captain Holding. "A man who is in the right can afford to speak with moderation." He turned to Crayford. "You must admit yourself," he continued, "that Wardour is right this time. The missing man belongs to my command, and in common justice one of my officers ought to supply his place."

It was impossible to dispute the matter further. The dullest man present could see that the captain's reply was unanswerable. In sheer despair, Crayford took Frank's arm and led him aside a few steps. The last chance left of parting the two men was the chance of appealing to Frank.

"My dear boy," he began, "I want to say one friendly word to you on the subject of your health. I have already, if you remember, expressed my doubts whether you are strong enough to make one of an exploring party. I feel those doubts more strongly than ever at this moment. Will you take the advice of a friend who wishes you well?"

Wardour had followed Crayford. Wardour roughly interposed before Frank could reply.

"Let him alone!"

Crayford paid no heed to the interruption. He was too earnestly bent on withdrawing Frank from the expedition to notice anything that was said or done by the persons about him.

"Don't, pray don't, risk hardships which you are unfit to bear!" he went on, entreatingly. "Your place can be easily filled. Change your mind, Frank. Stay here with me."

Again Wardour interfered. Again he called out, "Leave him alone!" more roughly than ever. Still deaf and blind to every consideration but one, Crayford pressed his entreaties on Frank.

"You owned yourself just now that you were not well seasoned to fatigue," he

persisted. "You feel (you must feel) how weak that last illness has left you? You know (I am sure you know) how unfit you are to brave exposure to cold, and long marches over the snow."

Irritated beyond endurance by Crayford's obstinacy; seeing, or thinking he saw, signs of yielding in Frank's face, Wardour so far forgot himself as to seize Crayford by the arm and attempt to drag him away from Frank. Crayford turned and looked at him.

"Richard," he said, very quietly, "you are not yourself. I pity you. Drop your hand."

Wardour relaxed his hold, with something of the sullen submission of a wild animal to its keeper. The momentary silence which followed gave Frank an opportunity of speaking at last.

"I am gratefully sensible, Crayford," he began, "of the interest which you take in me--"

"And you will follow my advice?" Crayford interposed, eagerly.

"My mind is made up, old friend," Frank answered, firmly and sadly. "Forgive me for disappointing you. I am appointed to the expedition. With the expedition I go." He moved nearer to Wardour. In his innocence of all suspicion he clapped Wardour heartily on the shoulder. "When I feel the fatigue," said poor simple Frank, "you will help me, comrade--won't you? Come along!"

Wardour snatched his gun out of the hands of the sailor who was carrying it for him. His dark face became suddenly irradiated with a terrible joy.

"Come!" he cried. "Over the snow and over the ice! Come! where no human footsteps have ever trodden, and where no human trace is ever left."

Blindly, instinctively, Crayford made an effort to part them. His brother officers, standing near, pulled him back. They looked at each other anxiously. The merciless cold, striking its victims in various ways, had struck in some instances at their reason first. Everybody loved Crayford. Was he, too, going on the dark way that others had taken before him? They forced him to seat himself on one of the lockers. "Steady, old fellow!" they said kindly--"steady!" Crayford yielded, writhing inwardly under the sense of his own helplessness. What in God's name could he do? Could he denounce Wardour to Captain Holding on bare suspicion--without so much as the

shadow of a proof to justify what he said? The captain would decline to insult one of his officers by even mentioning the monstrous accusation to him. The captain would conclude, as others had already concluded, that Crayford's mind was giving way under stress of cold and privation. No hope--literally, no hope now, but in the numbers of the expedition. Officers and men, they all liked Frank. As long as they could stir hand or foot, they would help him on the way--they would see that no harm came to him.

The word of command was given; the door was thrown open; the hut emptied rapidly. Over the merciless white snow--under the merciless black sky--the exploring party began to move. The sick and helpless men, whose last hope of rescue centered in their departing messmates, cheered faintly. Some few whose days were numbered sobbed and cried like women. Frank's voice faltered as he turned back at the door to say his last words to the friend who had been a father to him.

"God bless you, Crayford!"

Crayford broke away from the officers near him; and, hurrying forward, seized Frank by both hands. Crayford held him as if he would never let him go.

"God preserve you, Frank! I would give all I have in the world to be with you. Good-by! Good-by!"

Frank waved his hand--dashed away the tears that were gathering in his eyes--and hurried out. Crayford called after him, the last, the only warning that he could give:

"While you can stand, keep with the main body, Frank!"

Wardour, waiting till the last--Wardour, following Frank through the snow-drift--stopped, stepped back, and answered Crayford at the door:

"While he can stand, he keeps with Me."