Chapter 13.

The spring has come. The air of the April night just lifts the leaves of the sleeping flowers. The moon is queen in the cloudless and starless sky. The stillness of the midnight hour is abroad, over land and over sea.

In a villa on the westward shore of the Isle of Wight, the glass doors which lead from the drawing-room to the garden are yet open. The shaded lamp yet burns on the table. A lady sits by the lamp, reading. From time to time she looks out into the garden, and sees the white-robed figure of a young girl pacing slowly to and fro in the soft brightness of the moonlight on the lawn. Sorrow and suspense have set their mark on the lady. Not rivals only, but friends who formerly admired her, agree now that she looks worn and aged. The more merciful judgment of others remarks, with equal truth, that her eyes, her hair, her simple grace and grandeur of movement have lost but little of their olden charms. The truth lies, as usual, between the two extremes. In spite of sorrow and suffering, Mrs. Crayford is the beautiful Mrs. Crayford still.

The delicious silence of the hour is softly disturbed by the voice of the younger lady in the garden.

"Go to the piano, Lucy. It is a night for music. Play something that is worthy of the night."

Mrs. Crayford looks round at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"My dear Clara, it is past twelve! Remember what the doctor told you. You ought to have been in bed an hour ago."

"Half an hour, Lucy--give me half an hour more! Look at the moonlight on the sea. Is it possible to go to bed on such a night as this? Play something, Lucy--something spiritual and divine."

Earnestly pleading with her friend, Clara advances toward the window. She too has suffered under the wasting influences of suspense. Her face has lost its youthful freshness; no delicate flush of color rises on it when she speaks. The soft gray eyes which won Frank's heart in the by-gone time are sadly altered now. In repose, they have a dimmed and wearied look. In action, they are wild and restless, like eyes suddenly wakened from startling dreams. Robed in white--her soft brown hair hanging loosely over her

shoulders--there is something weird and ghost-like in the girl, as she moves nearer and nearer to the window in the full light of the moon--pleading for music that shall be worthy of the mystery and the beauty of the night.

"Will you come in here if I play to you?" Mrs. Crayford asks. "It is a risk, my love, to be out so long in the night air."

"No! no! I like it. Play--while I am out here looking at the sea. It quiets me; it comforts me; it does me good."

She glides back, ghost-like, over the lawn. Mrs. Crayford rises, and puts down the volume that she has been reading. It is a record of explorations in the Arctic seas. The time has gone by when the two lonely women could take an interest in subjects not connected with their own anxieties. Now, when hope is fast failing them--now, when their last news of the Wanderer and the Sea-mew is news that is more than two years old--they can read of nothing, they can think of nothing, but dangers and discoveries, losses and rescues in the terrible Polar seas.

Unwillingly, Mrs. Crayford puts her book aside, and opens the piano--Mozart's "Air in A, with Variations," lies open on the instrument. One after another she plays the lovely melodies, so simply, so purely beautiful, of that unpretending and unrivaled work. At the close of the ninth Variation (Clara's favorite), she pauses, and turns toward the garden.

"Shall I stop there?" she asks.

There is no answer. Has Clara wandered away out of hearing of the music that she loves--the music that harmonizes so subtly with the tender beauty of the night? Mrs. Crayford rises and advances to the window.

No! there is the white figure standing alone on the slope of the lawn--the head turned away from the house; the face looking out over the calm sea, whose gently rippling waters end in the dim line on the horizon which is the line of the Hampshire coast.

Mrs. Crayford advances as far as the path before the window, and calls to her.

"Clara!"

Again there is no answer. The white figure still stands immovably in its place.

With signs of distress in her face, but with no appearance of alarm, Mrs. Crayford returns to the room. Her own sad experience tells her what has happened. She summons the servants and directs them to wait in the drawing-room until she calls to them. This done, she returns to the garden, and approaches the mysterious figure on the lawn.

Dead to the outer world, as if she lay already in her grave--insensible to touch, insensible to sound, motionless as stone, cold as stone--Clara stands on the moonlit lawn, facing the seaward view. Mrs. Crayford waits at her side, patiently watching for the change which she knows is to come. "Catalepsy," as some call it--"hysteria," as others say--this alone is certain, the same interval always passes; the same change always appears.

It comes now. Not a change in her eyes; they still remain wide open, fixed and glassy. The first movement is a movement of her hands. They rise slowly from her side and waver in the air like the hands of a person groping in the dark. Another interval, and the movement spreads to her lips: they part and tremble. A few minutes more, and words begin to drop, one by one, from those parted lips--words spoken in a lost, vacant tone, as if she is talking in her sleep.

Mrs. Crayford looks back at the house. Sad experience makes her suspicious of the servants' curiosity. Sad experience has long since warned her that the servants are not to be trusted within hearing of the wild words which Clara speaks in the trance. Has any one of them ventured into the garden? No. They are out of hearing at the window, waiting for the signal which tells them that their help is needed.

Turning toward Clara once more, Mrs. Crayford hears the vacantly uttered words, falling faster and faster from her lips,

"Frank! Frank! Frank! Don't drop behind--don't trust Richard Wardour. While you can stand, keep with the other men, Frank!"

(The farewell warning of Crayford in the solitudes of the Frozen Deep, repeated by Clara in the garden of her English home!)

A moment of silence follows; and, in that moment, the vision has changed. She sees him on the iceberg now, at the mercy of the bitterest enemy he has on earth. She sees him drifting--over the black water, through the ashy light.

"Wake, Frank! wake and defend yourself! Richard Wardour knows that I love you--Richard Wardour's vengeance will take your life! Wake, Frank--wake! You are drifting to your death!" A low groan of horror bursts from her, sinister and terrible to hear. "Drifting! drifting!" she whispers to herself--"drifting to his death!"

Her glassy eyes suddenly soften--then close. A long shudder runs through her. A faint flush shows itself on the deadly pallor of her face, and fades again. Her limbs fail her. She sinks into Mrs. Crayford's arms.

The servants, answering the call for help, carry her into the house. They lay her insensible on her bed. After half an hour or more, her eyes open again--this time with the light of life in them--open, and rest languidly on the friend sitting by the bedside.

"I have had a dreadful dream," she murmurs faintly. "Am I ill, Lucy? I feel so weak."

Even as she says the words, sleep, gentle, natural sleep, takes her suddenly, as it takes young children weary with their play. Though it is all over now, though no further watching is required, Mrs. Crayford still keeps her place by the bedside, too anxious and too wakeful to retire to her own room.

On other occasions, she is accustomed to dismiss from her mind the words which drop from Clara in the trance. This time the effort to dismiss them is beyond her power. The words haunt her. Vainly she recalls to memory all that the doctors have said to her, in speaking of Clara in the state of trance. "What she vaguely dreads for the lost man whom she loves is mingled in her mind with what she is constantly reading, of trials, dangers, and escapes in the Arctic seas. The most startling things that she may say or do are all attributable to this cause, and may all be explained in this way." So the doctors have spoken; and, thus far, Mrs. Crayford has shared their view. It is only to-night that the girl's words ring in her ear, with a strange prophetic sound in them. It is only to-night that she asks herself: "Is Clara present, in the spirit, with our loved and lost ones in the lonely North? Can mortal vision see the dead and living in the solitudes of the Frozen Deep?"