

Chapter 16.

Once more the open sea--the sea whose waters break on the shores of Newfoundland! An English steamship lies at anchor in the offing. The vessel is plainly visible through the open doorway of a large boat-house on the shore--one of the buildings attached to a fishing-station on the coast of the island.

The only person in the boat-house at this moment is a man in the dress of a sailor. He is seated on a chest, with a piece of cord in his hand, looking out idly at the sea. On the rough carpenter's table near him lies a strange object to be left in such a place--a woman's veil.

What is the vessel lying at anchor in the offing?

The vessel is the Amazon--dispatched from England to receive the surviving officers and men of the Arctic Expedition. The meeting has been successfully effected, on the shores of North America, three days since. But the homeward voyage has been delayed by a storm which has driven the ship out of her course. Taking advantage, on the third day, of the first returning calm, the commander of the Amazon has anchored off the coast of Newfoundland, and has sent ashore to increase his supplies of water before he sails for England. The weary passengers have landed for a few hours, to refresh themselves after the discomforts of the tempest. Among them are the two ladies. The veil left on the table in the boat-house is Clara's veil.

And who is the man sitting on the chest, with the cord in his hand, looking out idly at the sea? The man is the only cheerful person in the ship's company. In other words--John Want.

Still reposing on the chest, our friend, who never grumbles, is surprised by the sudden appearance of a sailor at the boat-house door.

"Look sharp with your work there, John Want!" says the sailor. "Lieutenant Crayford is just coming in to look after you."

With this warning the messenger disappears again. John Want rises with a groan, turns the chest up on one end, and begins to fasten the cord round it. The ship's cook is not a man to look back on his rescue with the feeling of unmitigated satisfaction which animates his companions in trouble. On the contrary, he is ungratefully disposed to regret the North Pole.

"If I had only known"--thus runs the train of thought in the mind of John Want--"if I had only known, before I was rescued, that I was to be brought to this place, I believe I should have preferred staying at the North Pole. I was very happy keeping up everybody's spirits at the North Pole. Taking one thing with another, I think I must have been very comfortable at the North Pole--if I had only known it. Another man in my place might be inclined to say that this Newfoundland boat-house was rather a sloppy, slimy, draughty, fishy sort of a habitation to take shelter in. Another man might object to perpetual Newfoundland fogs, perpetual Newfoundland cod-fish, and perpetual Newfoundland dogs. We had some very nice bears at the North Pole. Never mind! it's all one to me--I don't grumble."

"Have you done cording that box?"

This time the voice is a voice of authority--the man at the doorway is Lieutenant Crayford himself. John Want answers his officer in his own cheerful way.

"I've done it as well as I can, sir--but the damp of this place is beginning to tell upon our very ropes. I say nothing about our lungs--I only say our ropes."

Crayford answers sharply. He seems to have lost his former relish for the humor of John Want.

"Pooh! To look at your wry face, one would think that our rescue from the Arctic regions was a downright misfortune. You deserve to be sent back again."

"I could be just as cheerful as ever, sir, if I was sent back again; I hope I'm thankful; but I don't like to hear the North Pole run down in such a fishy place as this. It was very clean and snowy at the North Pole--and it's very damp and sandy here. Do you never miss your bone-soup, sir? I do. It mightn't have been strong; but it was very hot; and the cold seemed to give it a kind of a meaty flavor as it went down. Was it you that was a-coughing so long last night, sir? I don't presume to say anything against the air of these latitudes; but I should be glad to know it wasn't you that was a-coughing so hollow. Would you be so obliging as just to feel the state of these ropes with the ends of your fingers, sir? You can dry them afterward on the back of my jacket."

"You ought to have a stick laid on the back of your jacket. Take that box

down to the boat directly. You croaking vagabond! You would have grumbled in the Garden of Eden."

The philosopher of the Expedition was not a man to be silenced by referring him to the Garden of Eden. Paradise itself was not perfect to John Want.

"I hope I could be cheerful anywhere, sir," said the ship's cook. "But you mark my words--there must have been a deal of troublesome work with the flower-beds in the Garden of Eden."

Having entered that unanswerable protest, John Want shouldered the box, and drifted drearily out of the boat-house.

Left by himself, Crayford looked at his watch, and called to a sailor outside.

"Where are the ladies?" he asked.

"Mrs. Crayford is coming this way, sir. She was just behind you when you came in."

"Is Miss Burnham with her?"

"No, sir; Miss Burnham is down on the beach with the passengers. I heard the young lady asking after you, sir."

"Asking after me?" Crayford considered with himself as he repeated the words. He added, in lower and graver tones, "You had better tell Miss Burnham you have seen me here."

The man made his salute and went out. Crayford took a turn in the boat-house.

Rescued from death in the Arctic wastes, and reunited to a beautiful wife, the lieutenant looked, nevertheless, unaccountably anxious and depressed. What could he be thinking of? He was thinking of Clara.

On the first day when the rescued men were received on board the Amazon, Clara had embarrassed and distressed, not Crayford only, but the other officers of the Expedition as well, by the manner in which she questioned them on the subject of Francis Aldersley and Richard Wardour. She had shown no signs of dismay or despair when she heard that no news had been received of the two missing men. She had even smiled sadly to herself, when Crayford (out of compassionate regard for her) declared that he and his

comrades had not given up the hope of seeing Frank and Wardour yet. It was only when the lieutenant had expressed himself in those terms and when it was hoped that the painful subject had been dismissed--that Clara had startled every one present by announcing that she had something still to say in relation to Frank and Wardour, which had not been said yet. Though she spoke guardedly, her next words revealed suspicions of foul play lurking in her mind--exactly reflecting similar suspicions lurking in Crayford's mind--which so distressed the lieutenant, and so surprised his comrades, as to render them quite incapable of answering her. The warnings of the storm which shortly afterward broke over the vessel were then visible in sea and sky. Crayford made them his excuse for abruptly leaving the cabin in which the conversation had taken place. His brother officers, profiting by his example, pleaded their duties on deck, and followed him out.

On the next day, and the next, the tempest still raged--and the passengers were not able to leave their state-rooms. But now, when the weather had moderated and the ship had anchored--now, when officers and passengers alike were on shore, with leisure time at their disposal--Clara had opportunities of returning to the subject of the lost men, and of asking questions in relation to them which would make it impossible for Crayford to plead an excuse for not answering her. How was he to meet those questions? How could he still keep her in ignorance of the truth?

These were the reflections which now troubled Crayford, and which presented him, after his rescue, in the strangely inappropriate character of a depressed and anxious man. His brother officers, as he well knew, looked to him to take the chief responsibility. If he declined to accept it, he would instantly confirm the horrible suspicion in Clara's mind. The emergency must be met; but how to meet it--at once honorably and mercifully--was more than Crayford could tell. He was still lost in his own gloomy thoughts when his wife entered the boat-house. Turning to look at her, he saw his own perturbations and anxieties plainly reflected in Mrs. Crayford's face.

"Have you seen anything of Clara?" he asked. "Is she still on the beach?"

"She is following me to this place," Mrs. Crayford replied. "I have been speaking to her this morning. She is just as resolute as ever to insist on your telling her of the circumstances under which Frank is missing. As things are, you have no alternative but to answer her."

"Help me to answer her, Lucy. Tell me, before she comes in, how this dreadful suspicion first took possession of her. All she could possibly have known when we left England was that the two men were appointed to

separate ships. What could have led her to suspect that they had come together?"

"She was firmly persuaded, William, that they would come together when the Expedition left England. And she had read in books of Arctic travel, of men left behind by their comrades on the march, and of men adrift on icebergs. With her mind full of these images and forebodings, she saw Frank and Wardour (or dreamed of them) in one of her attacks of trance. I was by her side; I heard what she said at the time. She warned Frank that Wardour had discovered the truth. She called out to him, 'While you can stand, keep with the other men, Frank!'"

"Good God!" cried Crayford; "I warned him myself, almost in those very words, the last time I saw him!"

"Don't acknowledge it, William! Keep her in ignorance of what you have just told me. She will not take it for what it is--a startling coincidence, and nothing more. She will accept it as positive confirmation of the faith, the miserable superstitious faith, that is in her. So long as you don't actually know that Frank is dead, and that he has died by Wardour's hand, deny what she says--mislead her for her own sake--dispute all her conclusions as I dispute them. Help me to raise her to the better and nobler belief in the mercy of God!" She stopped, and looked round nervously at the doorway. "Hush!" she whispered. "Do as I have told you. Clara is here."