

Chapter 17.

Clara stopped at the doorway, looking backward and forward distrustfully between the husband and wife. Entering the boat-house, and approaching Crayford, she took his arm, and led him away a few steps from the place in which Mrs. Crayford was standing.

"There is no storm now, and there are no duties to be done on board the ship," she said, with the faint, sad smile which it wrung Crayford's heart to see. "You are Lucy's husband, and you have an interest in me for Lucy's sake. Don't shrink on that account from giving me pain: I can bear pain. Friend and brother! will you believe that I have courage enough to hear the worst? Will you promise not to deceive me about Frank?"

The gentle resignation in her voice, the sad pleading in her look, shook Crayford's self-possession at the outset. He answered her in the worst possible manner; he answered evasively.

"My dear Clara," he said, "what have I done that you should suspect me of deceiving you?"

She looked him searchingly in the face, then glanced with renewed distrust at Mrs. Crayford. There was a moment of silence. Before any of the three could speak again, they were interrupted by the appearance of one of Crayford's brother officers, followed by two sailors carrying a hamper between them. Crayford instantly dropped Clara's arm, and seized the welcome opportunity of speaking of other things.

"Any instructions from the ship, Steventon?" he asked, approaching the officer.

"Verbal instructions only," Steventon replied. "The ship will sail with the flood-tide. We shall fire a gun to collect the people, and send another boat ashore. In the meantime here are some refreshments for the passengers. The ship is in a state of confusion; the ladies will eat their luncheon more comfortably here."

Hearing this, Mrs. Crayford took her opportunity of silencing Clara next.

"Come, my dear," she said. "Let us lay the cloth before the gentlemen come in."

Clara was too seriously bent on attaining the object which she had in view to be silenced in that way. "I will help you directly," she answered--then crossed the room and addressed herself to the officer, whose name was Steventon.

"Can you spare me a few minutes?" she asked. "I have something to say to you."

"I am entirely at your service, Miss Burnham."

Answering in those words, Steventon dismissed the two sailors. Mrs. Crayford looked anxiously at her husband. Crayford whispered to her, "Don't be alarmed about Steventon. I have cautioned him; his discretion is to be depended on."

Clara beckoned to Crayford to return to her.

"I will not keep you long," she said. "I will promise not to distress Mr. Steventon. Young as I am, you shall both find that I am capable of self-control. I won't ask you to go back to the story of your past sufferings; I only want to be sure that I am right about one thing--I mean about what happened at the time when the exploring party was dispatched in search of help. As I understand it, you cast lots among yourselves who was to go with the party, and who was to remain behind. Frank cast the lot to go." She paused, shuddering. "And Richard Wardour," she went on, "cast the lot to remain behind. On your honor, as officers and gentlemen, is this the truth?"

"On my honor," Crayford answered, "it is the truth."

"On my honor," Steventon repeated, "it is the truth."

She looked at them, carefully considering her next words, before she spoke again.

"You both drew the lot to stay in the huts," she said, addressing Crayford and Steventon. "And you are both here. Richard Wardour drew the lot to stay, and Richard Wardour is not here. How does his name come to be with Frank's on the list of the missing?"

The question was a dangerous one to answer. Steventon left it to Crayford to reply. Once again he answered evasively.

"It doesn't follow, my dear," he said, "that the two men were missing together because their names happen to come together on the list."

Clara instantly drew the inevitable conclusion from that ill-considered reply.

"Frank is missing from the party of relief," she said. "Am I to understand that Wardour is missing from the huts?"

Both Crayford and Steventon hesitated. Mrs. Crayford cast one indignant look at them, and told the necessary lie, without a moment's hesitation!

"Yes!" she said. "Wardour is missing from the huts."

Quickly as she had spoken, she had still spoken too late. Clara had noticed the momentary hesitation on the part of the two officers. She turned to Steventon.

"I trust to your honor," she said, quietly. "Am I right, or wrong, in believing that Mrs. Crayford is mistaken?"

She had addressed herself to the right man of the two. Steventon had no wife present to exercise authority over him. Steventon, put on his honor, and fairly forced to say something, owned the truth. Wardour had replaced an officer whom accident had disabled from accompanying the party of relief, and Wardour and Frank were missing together.

Clara looked at Mrs. Crayford.

"You hear?" she said. "It is you who are mistaken, not I. What you call 'Accident,' what I call 'Fate,' brought Richard Wardour and Frank together as members of the same Expedition, after all." Without waiting for a reply, she again turned to Steventon, and surprised him by changing the painful subject of the conversation of her own accord.

"Have you been in the Highlands of Scotland?" she asked.

"I have never been in the Highlands," the lieutenant replied.

"Have you ever read, in books about the Highlands, of such a thing as 'The Second Sight'?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in the Second Sight?"

Steventon politely declined to commit himself to a direct reply.

"I don't know what I might have done, if I had ever been in the Highlands," he said. "As it is, I have had no opportunities of giving the subject any serious consideration."

"I won't put your credulity to the test," Clara proceeded. "I won't ask you to believe anything more extraordinary than that I had a strange dream in England not very long since. My dream showed me what you have just acknowledged--and more than that. How did the two missing men come to be parted from their companions? Were they lost by pure accident, or were they deliberately left behind on the march?"

Crayford made a last vain effort to check her inquiries at the point which they had now reached.

"Neither Steventon nor I were members of the party of relief," he said. "How are we to answer you?"

"Your brother officers who were members of the party must have told you what happened," Clara rejoined. "I only ask you and Mr. Steventon to tell me what they told you."

Mrs. Crayford interposed again, with a practical suggestion this time.

"The luncheon is not unpacked yet," she said. "Come, Clara! this is our business, and the time is passing."

"The luncheon can wait a few minutes longer," Clara answered. "Bear with my obstinacy," she went on, laying her hand caressingly on Crayford's shoulder. "Tell me how those two came to be separated from the rest. You have always been the kindest of friends--don't begin to be cruel to me now!"

The tone in which she made her entreaty to Crayford went straight to the sailor's heart. He gave up the hopeless struggle: he let her see a glimpse of the truth.

"On the third day out," he said, "Frank's strength failed him. He fell behind the rest from fatigue."

"Surely they waited for him?"

"It was a serious risk to wait for him, my child. Their lives (and the lives of the men they had left in the huts) depended, in that dreadful climate, on their pushing on. But Frank was a favorite. They waited half a day to give Frank the chance of recovering his strength."

There he stopped. There the imprudence into which his fondness for Clara had led him showed itself plainly, and closed his lips.

It was too late to take refuge in silence. Clara was determined on hearing more.

She questioned Steventon next.

"Did Frank go on again after the half-day's rest?" she asked.

"He tried to go on--"

"And failed?"

"Yes."

"What did the men do when he failed? Did they turn cowards? Did they desert Frank?"

She had purposely used language which might irritate Steventon into answering her plainly. He was a young man--he fell into the snare that she had set for him.

"Not one among them was a coward, Miss Burnham!" he replied, warmly. "You are speaking cruelly and unjustly of as brave a set of fellows as ever lived! The strongest man among them set the example; he volunteered to stay by Frank, and to bring him on in the track of the exploring party."

There Steventon stopped--conscious, on his side, that he had said too much. Would she ask him who this volunteer was? No. She went straight on to the most embarrassing question that she had put yet--referring to the volunteer, as if Steventon had already mentioned his name.

"What made Richard Wardour so ready to risk his life for Frank's sake?" she said to Crayford. "Did he do it out of friendship for Frank? Surely you can tell me that? Carry your memory back to the days when you were all living in the huts. Were Frank and Wardour friends at that time? Did you never

hear any angry words pass between them?"

There Mrs. Crayford saw her opportunity of giving her husband a timely hint.

"My dear child!" she said; "how can you expect him to remember that? There must have been plenty of quarrels among the men, all shut up together, and all weary of each other's company, no doubt."

"Plenty of quarrels!" Crayford repeated; "and every one of them made up again."

"And every one of them made up again," Mrs. Crayford reiterated, in her turn. "There! a plainer answer than that you can't wish to have. Now are you satisfied? Mr. Steventon, come and lend a hand (as you say at sea) with the hamper--Clara won't help me. William, don't stand there doing nothing. This hamper holds a great deal; we must have a division of labor. Your division shall be laying the tablecloth. Don't handle it in that clumsy way! You unfold a table-cloth as if you were unfurling a sail. Put the knives on the right, and the forks on the left, and the napkin and the bread between them. Clara, if you are not hungry in this fine air, you ought to be. Come and do your duty; come and have some lunch!"

She looked up as she spoke. Clara appeared to have yielded at last to the conspiracy to keep her in the dark. She had returned slowly to the boat-house doorway, and she was standing alone on the threshold, looking out. Approaching her to lead her to the luncheon-table, Mrs. Crayford could hear that she was speaking softly to herself. She was repeating the farewell words which Richard Wardour had spoken to her at the ball.

"'A time may come when I shall forgive you. But the man who has robbed me of you shall rue the day when you and he first met.' Oh, Frank! Frank! does Richard still live, with your blood on his conscience, and my image in his heart?"

Her lips suddenly closed. She started, and drew back from the doorway, trembling violently. Mrs. Crayford looked out at the quiet seaward view.

"Anything there that frightens you, my dear?" she asked. "I can see nothing, except the boats drawn up on the beach."

"I can see nothing either, Lucy."

"And yet you are trembling as if there was something dreadful in the view from this door."

"There is something dreadful! I feel it, though I see nothing. I feel it, nearer and nearer in the empty air, darker and darker in the sunny light. I don't know what it is. Take me away! No. Not out on the beach. I can't pass the door. Somewhere else! somewhere else!"

Mrs. Crayford looked round her, and noticed a second door at the inner end of the boat-house. She spoke to her husband.

"See where that door leads to, William."

Crayford opened the door. It led into a desolate inclosure, half garden, half yard. Some nets stretched on poles were hanging up to dry. No other objects were visible--not a living creature appeared in the place. "It doesn't look very inviting, my dear," said Mrs. Crayford. "I am at your service, however. What do you say?"

She offered her arm to Clara as she spoke. Clara refused it. She took Crayford's arm, and clung to him.

"I'm frightened, dreadfully frightened!" she said to him, faintly. "You keep with me--a woman is no protection; I want to be with you." She looked round again at the boat-house doorway. "Oh!" she whispered, "I'm cold all over--I'm frozen with fear of this place. Come into the yard! Come into the yard!"

"Leave her to me," said Crayford to his wife. "I will call you, if she doesn't get better in the open air."

He took her out at once, and closed the yard door behind them.

"Mr. Steventon, do you understand this?" asked Mrs. Crayford. "What can she possibly be frightened of?"

She put the question, still looking mechanically at the door by which her husband and Clara had gone out. Receiving no reply, she glanced round at Steventon. He was standing on the opposite side of the luncheon-table, with his eyes fixed attentively on the view from the main doorway of the boat-house. Mrs. Crayford looked where Steventon was looking. This time there was something visible. She saw the shadow of a human figure projected on the stretch of smooth yellow sand in front of the boat-house.

In a moment more the figure appeared. A man came slowly into view, and stopped on the threshold of the door.

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The man was a sinister and terrible object to look at. His eyes glared like the eyes of a wild animal; his head was bare; his long gray hair was torn and tangled; his miserable garments hung about him in rags. He stood in the doorway, a speechless figure of misery and want, staring at the well-spread table like a hungry dog.

Steventon spoke to him.

"Who are you?"

He answered, in a hoarse, hollow voice,

"A starving man."

He advanced a few steps, slowly and painfully, as if he were sinking under fatigue.

"Throw me some bones from the table," he said. "Give me my share along with the dogs."

There was madness as well as hunger in his eyes while he spoke those words. Steventon placed Mrs. Crayford behind him, so that he might be easily able to protect her in case of need, and beckoned to two sailors who were passing the door of the boat-house at the time.

"Give the man some bread and meat," he said, "and wait near him."

The outcast seized on the bread and meat with lean, long-nailed hands that looked like claws. After his first mouthful of the food, he stopped, considered vacantly with himself, and broke the bread and meat into two portions. One portion he put into an old canvas wallet that hung over his shoulder; the other he devoured voraciously. Steventon questioned him.

"Where do you come from?"

"From the sea."

"Wrecked?"

"Yes."

Steventon turned to Mrs. Crayford.

"There may be some truth in the poor wretch's story," he said. "I heard something of a strange boat having been cast on the beach thirty or forty miles higher up the coast. When were you wrecked, my man?"

The starving creature looked up from his food, and made an effort to collect his thoughts--to exert his memory. It was not to be done. He gave up the attempt in despair. His language, when he spoke, was as wild as his looks.

"I can't tell you," he said. "I can't get the wash of the sea out of my ears. I can't get the shining stars all night, and the burning sun all day, out of my brain. When was I wrecked? When was I first adrift in the boat? When did I get the tiller in my hand and fight against hunger and sleep? When did the gnawing in my breast, and the burning in my head, first begin? I have lost all reckoning of it. I can't think; I can't sleep; I can't get the wash of the sea out of my ears. What are you baiting me with questions for? Let me eat!"

Even the sailors pitied him. The sailors asked leave of their officer to add a little drink to his meal.

"We've got a drop of grog with us, sir, in a bottle. May we give it to him?"

"Certainly!"

He took the bottle fiercely, as he had taken the food, drank a little, stopped, and considered with himself again. He held up the bottle to the light, and, marking how much liquor it contained, carefully drank half of it only. This done, he put the bottle in his wallet along with the food.

"Are you saving it up for another time?" said Steventon.

"I'm saving it up," the man answered. "Never mind what for. That's my secret."

He looked round the boat-house as he made that reply, and noticed Mrs. Crayford for the first time.

"A woman among you!" he said. "Is she English? Is she young? Let me look

closer at her."

He advanced a few steps toward the table.

"Don't be afraid, Mrs. Crayford," said Steventon.

"I am not afraid," Mrs. Crayford replied. "He frightened me at first--he interests me now. Let him speak to me if he wishes it!"

He never spoke. He stood, in dead silence, looking long and anxiously at the beautiful Englishwoman.

"Well?" said Steventon.

He shook his head sadly, and drew back again with a heavy sigh.

"No!" he said to himself, "that's not her face. No! not found yet."

Mrs. Crayford's interest was strongly excited. She ventured to speak to him.

"Who is it you want to find?" she asked. "Your wife?"

He shook his head again.

"Who, then? What is she like?"

He answered that question in words. His hoarse, hollow voice softened, little by little, into sorrowful and gentle tones.

"Young," he said; "with a fair, sad face--with kind, tender eyes--with a soft, clear voice. Young and loving and merciful. I keep her face in my mind, though I can keep nothing else. I must wander, wander, wander--restless, sleepless, homeless--till I find her! Over the ice and over the snow; tossing on the sea, tramping over the land; awake all night, awake all day; wander, wander, wander, till I find her!"

He waved his hand with a gesture of farewell, and turned wearily to go out.

At the same moment Crayford opened the yard door.

"I think you had better come to Clara," he began, and checked himself, noticing the stranger. "Who is that?"

The shipwrecked man, hearing another voice in the room, looked round slowly over his shoulder. Struck by his appearance, Crayford advanced a little nearer to him. Mrs. Crayford spoke to her husband as he passed her.

"It's only a poor, mad creature, William," she whispered--"shipwrecked and starving."

"Mad?" Crayford repeated, approaching nearer and nearer to the man. "Am I in my right senses?" He suddenly sprang on the outcast, and seized him by the throat. "Richard Wardour!" he cried, in a voice of fury. "Alive!--alive, to answer for Frank!"

The man struggled. Crayford held him.

"Where is Frank?" he said. "You villain, where is Frank?"

The man resisted no longer. He repeated vacantly,

"Villain? and where is Frank?"

As the name escaped his lips, Clara appeared at the open yard door, and hurried into the room.

"I heard Richard's name!" she said. "I heard Frank's name! What does it mean?"

At the sound of her voice the outcast renewed the struggle to free himself, with a sudden frenzy of strength which Crayford was not able to resist. He broke away before the sailors could come to their officer's assistance. Half-way down the length of the room he and Clara met one another face to face. A new light sparkled in the poor wretch's eyes; a cry of recognition burst from his lips. He flung one hand up wildly in the air. "Found!" he shouted, and rushed out to the beach before any of the men present could stop him.

Mrs. Crayford put her arms round Clara and held her up. She had not made a movement: she had not spoken a word. The sight of Wardour's face had petrified her.

The minutes passed, and there rose a sudden burst of cheering from the sailors on the beach, near the spot where the fishermen's boats were drawn up. Every man left his work. Every man waved his cap in the air. The passengers, near at hand, caught the infection of enthusiasm, and joined the crew. A moment more, and Richard Wardour appeared again in the

doorway, carrying a man in his arms. He staggered, breathless with the effort that he was making, to the place where Clara stood, held up in Mrs. Crayford's arms.

"Saved, Clara!" he cried. "Saved for you!"

He released the man, and placed him in Clara's arms.

Frank! foot-sore and weary--but living--saved; saved for her!

"Now, Clara!" cried Mrs. Crayford, "which of us is right? I who believed in the mercy of God? or you who believed in a dream?"

She never answered; she clung to Frank in speechless ecstasy. She never even looked at the man who had preserved him, in the first absorbing joy of seeing Frank alive. Step by step, slower and slower, Richard Wardour drew back, and left them by themselves.

"I may rest now," he said, faintly. "I may sleep at last. The task is done. The struggle is over."

His last reserves of strength had been given to Frank. He stopped--he staggered--his hands waved feebly in search of support. But for one faithful friend he would have fallen. Crayford caught him. Crayford laid his old comrade gently on some sails strewn in a corner, and pillowed Wardour's weary head on his own bosom. The tears streamed over his face. "Richard! dear Richard!" he said. "Remember--and forgive me."

Richard neither heeded nor heard him. His dim eyes still looked across the room at Clara and Frank.

"I have made her happy!" he murmured. "I may lay down my weary head now on the mother earth that hushes all her children to rest at last. Sink, heart! sink, sink to rest! Oh, look at them!" he said to Crayford, with a burst of grief. "They have forgotten me already."

It was true! The interest was all with the two lovers. Frank was young and handsome and popular. Officers, passengers, and sailors, they all crowded round Frank. They all forgot the martyred man who had saved him--the man who was dying in Crayford's arms.

Crayford tried once more to attract his attention--to win his recognition while there was yet time. "Richard, speak to me! Speak to your old friend!"

He look round; he vacantly repeated Crayford's last word.

"Friend?" he said. "My eyes are dim, friend--my mind is dull. I have lost all memories but the memory of her. Dead thoughts--all dead thoughts but that one! And yet you look at me kindly! Why has your face gone down with the wreck of all the rest?"

He paused; his face changed; his thoughts drifted back from present to past; he looked at Crayford vacantly, lost in the terrible remembrances that were rising in him, as the shadows rise with the coming night.

"Hark ye, friend," he whispered. "Never let Frank know it. There was a time when the fiend within me hungered for his life. I had my hands on the boat. I heard the voice of the Tempter speaking to me: Launch it, and leave him to die! I waited with my hands on the boat, and my eyes on the place where he slept. 'Leave him! leave him!' the voice whispered. 'Love him!' the lad's voice answered, moaning and murmuring in his sleep. 'Love him, Clara, for helping me!' I heard the morning wind come up in the silence over the great deep. Far and near, I heard the groaning of the floating ice; floating, floating to the clear water and the balmy air. And the wicked Voice floated away with it--away, away, away forever! 'Love him! love him, Clara, for helping me!' No wind could float that away! 'Love him, Clara--'"

His voice sank into silence; his head dropped on Crayford's breast. Frank saw it. Frank struggled up on his bleeding feet and parted the friendly throng round him. Frank had not forgotten the man who had saved him.

"Let me go to him!" he cried. "I must and will go to him! Clara, come with me."

Clara and Steventon supported him between them. He fell on his knees at Wardour's side; he put his hand on Wardour's bosom.

"Richard!"

The weary eyes opened again. The sinking voice was heard feebly once more.

"Ah! poor Frank. I didn't forget you, Frank, when I came here to beg. I remembered you lying down outside in the shadow of the boats. I saved you your share of the food and drink. Too weak to get at it now! A little rest, Frank! I shall soon be strong enough to carry you down to the ship."

The end was near. They all saw it now. The men reverently uncovered their heads in the presence of Death. In an agony of despair, Frank appealed to the friends round him.

"Get something to strengthen him, for God's sake! Oh, men! men! I should never have been here but for him! He has given all his strength to my weakness; and now, see how strong I am, and how weak he is! Clara, I held by his arm all over the ice and snow. He kept watch when I was senseless in the open boat. His hand dragged me out of the waves when we were wrecked. Speak to him, Clara! speak to him!" His voice failed him, and his head dropped on Wardour's breast.

She spoke, as well as her tears would let her.

"Richard, have you forgotten me?"

He rallied at the sound of that beloved voice. He looked up at her as she knelt at his head.

"Forgotten you?" Still looking at her, he lifted his hand with an effort, and laid it on Frank. "Should I have been strong enough to save him, if I could have forgotten you?" He waited a moment and turned his face feebly toward Crayford. "Stay!" he said. "Someone was here and spoke to me." A faint light of recognition glimmered in his eyes. "Ah, Crayford! I recollect now. Dear Crayford! come nearer! My mind clears, but my eyes grow dim. You will remember me kindly for Frank's sake? Poor Frank! why does he hide his face? Is he crying? Nearer, Clara--I want to look my last at you. My sister, Clara! Kiss me, sister, kiss me before I die!"

She stooped and kissed his forehead. A faint smile trembled on his lips. It passed away; and stillness possessed the face--the stillness of Death.

Crayford's voice was heard in the silence.

"The loss is ours," he said. "The gain is his. He has won the greatest of all conquests--the conquest of himself. And he has died in the moment of victory. Not one of us here but may live to envy his glorious death."

The distant report of a gun came from the ship in the offing, and signaled the return to England and to home.