

The Frozen Deep

By

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First Scene--The Ball-room

Chapter 1

The date is between twenty and thirty years ago. The place is an English sea-port. The time is night. And the business of the moment is--dancing.

The Mayor and Corporation of the town are giving a grand ball, in celebration of the departure of an Arctic expedition from their port. The ships of the expedition are two in number--the Wanderer and the Sea-mew. They are to sail (in search of the Northwest Passage) on the next day, with the morning tide.

Honor to the Mayor and Corporation! It is a brilliant ball. The band is complete. The room is spacious. The large conservatory opening out of it is pleasantly lighted with Chinese lanterns, and beautifully decorated with shrubs and flowers. All officers of the army and navy who are present wear their uniforms in honor of the occasion. Among the ladies, the display of dresses (a subject which the men don't understand) is bewildering--and the average of beauty (a subject which the men do understand) is the highest average attainable, in all parts of the room.

For the moment, the dance which is in progress is a quadrille. General admiration selects two of the ladies who are dancing as its favorite objects. One is a dark beauty in the prime of womanhood--the wife of First Lieutenant Crayford, of the Wanderer. The other is a young girl, pale and delicate; dressed simply in white; with no ornament on her head but her own lovely brown hair. This is Miss Clara Burnham--an orphan. She is Mrs. Crayford's dearest friend, and she is to stay with Mrs. Crayford during the lieutenant's absence in the Arctic regions. She is now dancing, with the lieutenant himself for partner, and with Mrs. Crayford and Captain Holding (commanding officer of the Wanderer) for vis-a-vis--in plain English, for opposite couple.

The conversation between Captain Holding and Mrs. Crayford, in one of the intervals of the dance, turns on Miss Burnham. The captain is greatly interested in Clara. He admires her beauty; but he thinks her manner--for a young girl--strangely serious and subdued. Is she in delicate health?

Mrs. Crayford shakes her head; sighs mysteriously; and answers,

"In very delicate health, Captain Holding."

"Consumptive?"

"Not in the least."

"I am glad to hear that. She is a charming creature, Mrs. Crayford. She interests me indescribably. If I was only twenty years younger--perhaps (as I am not twenty years younger) I had better not finish the sentence? Is it indiscreet, my dear lady, to inquire what is the matter with her?"

"It might be indiscreet, on the part of a stranger," said Mrs. Crayford. "An old friend like you may make any inquiries. I wish I could tell you what is the matter with Clara. It is a mystery to the doctors themselves. Some of the mischief is due, in my humble opinion, to the manner in which she has been brought up."

"Ay! ay! A bad school, I suppose."

"Very bad, Captain Holding. But not the sort of school which you have in your mind at this moment. Clara's early years were spent in a lonely old house in the Highlands of Scotland. The ignorant people about her were the people who did the mischief which I have just been speaking of. They filled her mind with the superstitions which are still respected as truths in the wild North--especially the superstition called the Second Sight."

"God bless me!" cried the captain, "you don't mean to say she believes in such stuff as that? In these enlightened times too!"

Mrs. Crayford looked at her partner with a satirical smile.

"In these enlightened times, Captain Holding, we only believe in dancing tables, and in messages sent from the other world by spirits who can't spell! By comparison with such superstitions as these, even the Second Sight has something--in the shape of poetry--to recommend it, surely? Estimate for yourself," she continued seriously, "the effect of such surroundings as I have described on a delicate, sensitive young creature--a girl with a naturally imaginative temperament leading a lonely, neglected life. Is it so very surprising that she should catch the infection of the superstition about her? And is it quite incomprehensible that her nervous system should suffer accordingly, at a very critical period of her life?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Crayford--not at all, ma'am, as you put it. Still it is a little startling, to a commonplace man like me, to meet a young lady at a ball who believes in the Second Sight. Does she really profess to see into the future? Am I to understand that she positively falls into a trance, and sees people in distant countries, and foretells events to come? That is the Second Sight, is it not?"

"That is the Second Sight, captain. And that is, really and positively, what she does."

"The young lady who is dancing opposite to us?"

"The young lady who is dancing opposite to us."

The captain waited a little--letting the new flood of information which had poured in on him settle itself steadily in his mind. This process accomplished, the Arctic explorer proceeded resolutely on his way to further discoveries.

"May I ask, ma'am, if you have ever seen her in a state of trance with your own eyes?" he inquired.

"My sister and I both saw her in the trance, little more than a month since," Mrs. Crayford replied. "She had been nervous and irritable all the morning; and we took her out into the garden to breathe the fresh air. Suddenly, without any reason for it, the color left her face. She stood between us, insensible to touch, insensible to sound; motionless as stone, and cold as death in a moment. The first change we noticed came after a lapse of some minutes. Her hands began to move slowly, as if she was groping in the dark. Words dropped one by one from her lips, in a lost, vacant tone, as if she was talking in her sleep. Whether what she said referred to past or future I cannot tell you. She spoke of persons in a foreign country--perfect strangers to my sister and to me. After a little interval, she suddenly became silent. A momentary color appeared in her face, and left it again. Her eyes closed--her feet failed her--and she sank insensible into our arms."

"Sank insensible into your arms," repeated the captain, absorbing his new information. "Most extraordinary! And--in this state of health--she goes out to parties, and dances. More extraordinary still!"

"You are entirely mistaken," said Mrs. Crayford. "She is only here to-night to please me; and she is only dancing to please my husband. As a rule, she shuns all society. The doctor recommends change and amusement for her. She won't listen to him. Except on rare occasions like this, she persists in remaining at home."

Captain Holding brightened at the allusion to the doctor. Something practical might be got out of the doctor. Scientific man. Sure to see this very obscure subject under a new light. "How does it strike the doctor now?" said the captain. "Viewed simply as a Case, ma'am, how does it strike the doctor?"

"He will give no positive opinion," Mrs. Crayford answered. "He told me that such cases as Clara's were by no means unfamiliar to medical practice. 'We know,' he told me, 'that certain disordered conditions of the brain and the nervous system produce results quite as extraordinary as any that you have described--and there our knowledge ends. Neither my science nor any man's science can clear up the mystery in this case. It is an especially difficult case to deal with, because Miss Burnham's early associations dispose her to attach a superstitious importance to the malady--the hysterical malady as some doctors would call it--from which she suffers. I can give you instructions for preserving her general health; and I can recommend you to try some change in her life--provided you first relieve her mind of any secret anxieties that may possibly be preying on it.'"

The captain smiled self-approvingly. The doctor had justified his anticipations. The doctor had suggested a practical solution of the difficulty.

"Ay! ay! At last we have hit the nail on the head! Secret anxieties. Yes! yes! Plain enough now. A disappointment in love--eh, Mrs. Crayford?"

"I don't know, Captain Holding; I am quite in the dark. Clara's confidence in me--in other matters unbounded--is, in this matter of her (supposed) anxieties, a confidence still withheld. In all else we are like sisters. I sometimes fear there may indeed be some trouble preying secretly on her mind. I sometimes feel a little hurt at her incomprehensible silence."

Captain Holding was ready with his own practical remedy for this difficulty.

"Encouragement is all she wants, ma'am. Take my word for it, this matter rests entirely with you. It's all in a nutshell. Encourage her to confide in you--and she will confide."

"I am waiting to encourage her, captain, until she is left alone with me--after you have all sailed for the Arctic seas. In the meantime, will you consider what I have said to you as intended for your ear only? And will you forgive me, if I own that the turn the subject has taken does not tempt me to pursue it any further?"

The captain took the hint. He instantly changed the subject; choosing, on this occasion, safe professional topics. He spoke of ships that were ordered on foreign service; and, finding that these as subjects failed to interest Mrs. Crayford, he spoke next of ships that were ordered home again. This last experiment produced its effect--an effect which the captain had not bargained for.

"Do you know," he began, "that the Atalanta is expected back from the West Coast of Africa every day? Have you any acquaintances among the officers of that ship?"

As it so happened, he put those questions to Mrs. Crayford while they were engaged in one of the figures of the dance which brought them within hearing of the opposite couple. At the same moment--to the astonishment of her friends and admirers--Miss Clara Burnham threw the quadrille into confusion by making a mistake! Everybody waited to see her set the mistake right. She made no attempt to set it right--she turned deadly pale and caught her partner by the arm.

"The heat!" she said, faintly. "Take me away--take me into the air!"

Lieutenant Crayford instantly led her out of the dance, and took her into the cool and empty conservatory, at the end of the room. As a matter of course, Captain Holding and Mrs. Crayford left the quadrille at the same time. The captain saw his way to a joke.

"Is this the trance coming on?" he whispered. "If it is, as commander of the Arctic expedition, I have a particular request to make. Will the Second Sight oblige me by seeing the shortest way to the Northwest Passage, before we leave England?"

Mrs. Crayford declined to humor the joke. "If you will excuse my leaving you," she said quietly, "I will try and find out what is the matter with Miss Burnham."

At the entrance to the conservatory, Mrs. Crayford encountered her husband. The lieutenant was of middle age, tall and comely. A man with a winning simplicity and gentleness in his manner, and an irresistible kindness in his brave blue eyes. In one word, a man whom everybody loved--including his wife.

"Don't be alarmed," said the lieutenant. "The heat has overcome her--that's all."

Mrs. Crayford shook her head, and looked at her husband, half satirically, half fondly.

"You dear old innocent!" she exclaimed, "that excuse may do for you. For my part, I don't believe a word of it. Go and get another partner, and leave Clara to me."

She entered the conservatory and seated herself by Clara's side.

Chapter 2

"Now, my dear!" Mrs. Crayford began, "what does this mean?"

"Nothing."

"That won't do, Clara. Try again."

"The heat of the room--"

"That won't do, either. Say that you choose to keep your own secrets, and I shall understand what you mean."

Clara's sad, clear gray eyes looked up for the first time in Mrs. Crayford's face, and suddenly became dimmed with tears.

"If I only dared tell you!" she murmured. "I hold so to your good opinion of me, Lucy--and I am so afraid of losing it."

Mrs. Crayford's manner changed. Her eyes rested gravely and anxiously on Clara's face.

"You know as well as I do that nothing can shake my affection for you," she said. "Do justice, my child, to your old friend. There is nobody here to listen to what we say. Open your heart, Clara. I see you are in trouble, and I want to comfort you."

Clara began to yield. In other words, she began to make conditions.

"Will you promise to keep what I tell you a secret from every living creature?" she began.

Mrs. Crayford met that question, by putting a question on her side.

"Does 'every living creature' include my husband?"

"Your husband more than anybody! I love him, I revere him. He is so noble; he is so good! If I told him what I am going to tell you, he would despise me. Own it plainly, Lucy, if I am asking too much in asking you to keep a secret from your husband."

"Nonsense, child! When you are married, you will know that the easiest of all secrets to keep is a secret from your husband. I give you my promise. Now begin!"

Clara hesitated painfully.

"I don't know how to begin!" she exclaimed, with a burst of despair. "The words won't come to me."

"Then I must help you. Do you feel ill tonight? Do you feel as you felt that day when you were with my sister and me in the garden?"

"Oh no."

"You are not ill, you are not really affected by the heat--and yet you turn as pale as ashes, and you are obliged to leave the quadrille! There must be some reason for this."

"There is a reason. Captain Holding--"

"Captain Holding! What in the name of wonder has the captain to do with it?"

"He told you something about the Atalanta. He said the Atalanta was expected back from Africa immediately."

"Well, and what of that? Is there anybody in whom you are interested coming home in the ship?"

"Somebody whom I am afraid of is coming home in the ship."

Mrs. Crayford's magnificent black eyes opened wide in amazement.

"My dear Clara! do you really mean what you say?"

"Wait a little, Lucy, and you shall judge for yourself. We must go back--if I am to make you understand me--to the year before we knew each other--to the last year of my father's life. Did I ever tell you that my father moved southward, for the sake of his health, to a house in Kent that was lent to him by a friend?"

"No, my dear; I don't remember ever hearing of the house in Kent. Tell me about it."

"There is nothing to tell, except this: the new house was near a fine country-seat standing in its own park. The owner of the place was a gentleman named Wardour. He, too, was one of my father's Kentish friends. He had an only son."

She paused, and played nervously with her fan. Mrs. Crayford looked at her attentively. Clara's eyes remained fixed on her fan--Clara said no more. "What was the son's name?" asked Mrs. Crayford, quietly.

"Richard."

"Am I right, Clara, in suspecting that Mr. Richard Wardour admired you?"

The question produced its intended effect. The question helped Clara to go on.

"I hardly knew at first," she said, "whether he admired me or not. He was very strange in his ways--headstrong, terribly headstrong and passionate; but generous and affectionate in spite of his faults of temper. Can you understand such a character?"

"Such characters exist by thousands. I have my faults of temper. I begin to like Richard already. Go on."

"The days went by, Lucy, and the weeks went by. We were thrown very much together. I began, little by little, to have some suspicion of the truth."

"And Richard helped to confirm your suspicions, of course?"

"No. He was not--unhappily for me--he was not that sort of man. He never spoke of the feeling with which he regarded me. It was I who saw it. I couldn't help seeing it. I did all I could to show that I was willing to be a sister to him, and that I could never be anything else. He did not understand me, or he would not, I can't say which."

"'Would not,' is the most likely, my dear. Go on."

"It might have been as you say. There was a strange, rough bashfulness about him. He confused and puzzled me. He never spoke out. He seemed to treat me as if our future lives had been provided for while we were children. What could I do, Lucy?"

"Do? You could have asked your father to end the difficulty for you."

"Impossible! You forget what I have just told you. My father was suffering at that time under the illness which afterward caused his death. He was quite unfit to interfere."

"Was there no one else who could help you?"

"No one."

"No lady in whom you could confide?"

"I had acquaintances among the ladies in the neighborhood. I had no friends."

"What did you do, then?"

"Nothing. I hesitated; I put off coming to an explanation with him, unfortunately, until it was too late."

"What do you mean by too late?"

"You shall hear. I ought to have told you that Richard Wardour is in the navy--"

"Indeed! I am more interested in him than ever. Well?"

"One spring day Richard came to our house to take leave of us before he joined his ship. I thought he was gone, and I went into the next room. It was my own sitting-room, and it opened on to the garden."--

"Yes?"

"Richard must have been watching me. He suddenly appeared in the garden. Without waiting for me to invite him, he walked into the room. I was a little startled as well as surprised, but I managed to hide it. I said, 'What is it, Mr. Wardour?' He stepped close up to me; he said, in his quick, rough way: 'Clara! I am going to the African coast. If I live, I shall come back promoted; and we both know what will happen then.' He kissed me. I was half frightened, half angry. Before I could compose myself to say a word, he was out in the garden again--he was gone! I ought to have spoken, I know. It was not honorable, not kind toward him. You can't reproach me for my want of courage and frankness more bitterly than I reproach myself!"

"My dear child, I don't reproach you. I only think you might have written to him."

"I did write."

"Plainly?"

"Yes. I told him in so many words that he was deceiving himself, and that I could never marry him."

"Plain enough, in all conscience! Having said that, surely you are not to blame. What are you fretting about now?"

"Suppose my letter has never reached him?"

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