My Wife's Promise

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It was my fate at an early period of my life to abandon myself to the perilous delights of a career which of all others exercises the most potent fascination over the mind of him who pursues it. As a youth I joined a band of brave adventurers in an Arctic expedition, and from the hour in which I first saw the deep cold blue of the northern sea, and felt the subtle influence of the rarefied polar air, I was for all common purposes and objects of life a lost man. The expedition was unfortunate, though its leader was a wise and scientific navigator—his subordinates picked men. The result was bitter disappointment and more bitter loss—loss of valuable lives as well as of considerable funds. I came back from my cruise in the 'Weatherwise,' to the western world, rejoiced beyond measure at the idea of being once more at home, and determined never again to face the horrors of that perilous region which had lost me so many dear companions.

I, Richard Dunravyne, was the elder son of a wealthy house, my father, a man of some influence in the political world, and there were few positions which need have been impossible for me had I aspired to the ordinary career affected by British youth. I had been indulged in my early passion for the sea, in my later rage for Arctic exploration; and it was hoped that, having satisfied these boyish fancies, I should now settle down to a pursuit more consonant with the views and wishes of my people. My mother wept over her restored treasure and confessed how terrible had been her fears during my absence; my father congratulated me upon having ridden my hobby, and alighted therefrom without a broken neck; and my family anxiously awaited my choice of a profession.

Such a choice I found impossible. If I had bartered myself body and soul, by the most explicit formula, to some demon of the icebergs, or incarnate spirit of the frozen sea, I could not have been more completely bound than I was. From the Christmas hearth round which dear friends were gathered, from my low seat at my mother's knee, from worldly wealth and worldly pleasure, the genius of the polar ocean beckoned me away, and all the blessings of my life, all the natural affections of my heart, were too weak to hold me. In my dreams, again and again, with maddening repetition, I trod the old paths, and saw, ghastly white against the intense purple of

that northern sky, the walls of ice that had blocked our passage. It seemed to me that if I could but find myself again in that dread solitude, success would be a certainty. It seemed to me as if we had held the magic clue to that awful labyrinth between our fingers, and had, in very folly, suffered it to escape us. ‘A new expedition, aided by the knowledge of the past, must succeed,’ I said to myself; and when I could no longer fight against the prepossession that held me, I consulted the survivors of our unfortunate voyage, and found in their opinions the actual echo of my own convictions.

We met many times, and our meetings resulted in the organization of a new expedition. Money was poured into our little treasury like water, so poor a dross did it seem to us compared with the jewel we went to seek. Our preparations had begun before I dared tell those who loved me that I had pledged myself to a second expedition. But at last, one bright spring evening, I went home and announced my decision. I look back now and wonder at my own heartlessness, and yet I was not indifferent to their grief. The cry that my mother gave when she knew the truth rings in my ears as I write this. No; I was not indifferent. I was possessed.

My second voyage resulted in little actual success, but was to me one prolonged scene of enjoyment. I was a skilled seaman and navigator, no indifferent sportsman, and having acquired some slight reputation during the previous voyage, now ranked high among the junior officers on board the ‘Ptarmigan.’ We wintered at Repulse Bay, with a short stock of fuel, and a shorter supply of provisions; but we managed with a minimum of the former luxury, and supplied all deficiency of the latter by the aid of our guns. Never was a merrier banquet eaten than our Christmas dinner of reindeer steaks and currant dumplings, though the thermometer had sunk 79° below freezing-point, and our jerseys and trousers sparkled with hoar-frost.

The brief summer of that northern latitude brought us some small triumphs. We spent a second winter in snow houses, which resembled gigantic bee-hives, and were the snuggest possible habitations, and in the second summer turned our course homeward, in excellent health and spirits, but my gladness was to be sorely dashed on landing in England.

I returned to find my mother’s grave bright with familiar autumnal flowers in a suburban cemetery, and to know that the tender arms which had clung about me in the hour of parting would never encircle me again. The blow was a severe one, and for some time to come I thought with aversion of that strange northern world which had cost me, and which was yet to cost me, so much.

Time passed, and I remained in England, at twenty-five years of age a broken man. With the men I met I had no point of sympathy. Their pursuits bored me, their paltry ambitions disgusted me. The pleasures of civilized life had not the faintest charm for me. A polar bear would have been as much at home as I was in a West-end ball-room, and would have been as interested in the conversation of a genteel dinner-table. Away from my old comrades of the ‘Weatherwise’ and the ‘Ptarmigan,’ I had not a friend for whom I really cared ; and as the civilized world grew day by day more distasteful to me, the old longing revived—the old dreams haunted my sleep. In my father’s handsome drawing-rooms I yearned for the rough stone cabin of Repulse Bay, or the snow-hives of Cape Crozier. Another expedition was afloat, and letters from my old messmates announced anticipated triumphs, and warned me of the remorse which I should suffer when the hardy victors returned to reproach the idler who preferred to live at home at ease, while old friends were drifting among the ice-floes, and bearding the grisly tyrant of the north.

I let them go without me, at what sacrifice was only known to myself. My father’s health had been declining from the hour of my mother’s death, and I was determined not to leave him. This duty at least I would not abnegate. This last sad privilege of attending a father’s death-bed I would not barter to the all-exacting demon of the frozen seas. For three empty, patient years I remained at home. My hands reverently closed the eyes that had never looked upon me but with affection, and I alone watched the last quiet sleep. This being done, I was free once more, and the old infatuation held me close as ever. My father’s death left me wealthy, and to my mind wealth had but one use, All the old yearnings were intensified by tenfold, for the saddest reason. The ‘Ptarmigan’ had never been heard of since the hour she left Baffin’s Bay, and the fate of those familiar comrades with whom I had lived in the closest communion for two happy years was a dark enigma, only to be solved by patient labour. The expedition had not been of sufficient importance to attract much attention from the scientific world; there had been too much of a volunteer and amateur character in the business; but when the fact of the ‘Ptarmigan’s’ disappearance became known, a meeting of the Royal Society gave all due consideration to the case, and promised help to a party of investigation.

My ample fortune enabled me to contribute largely to the expenses of the new voyage, while volunteers and voluntary contributions poured in from every quarter. I had difficulty in selecting officers and crew from so large a number of hardy adventurers; but I was prudent enough to engage the crew of a battered old whaler for the staple of my men. "We were away in all six years, wintering sometimes in

South America —once in New York, and getting our supplies as best we might. We made some discoveries, which the Royal Society received with civil approval; but of those we went to seek we found no trace; and I began to think that the fate of my old friends was a mystery never to be solved below the stars.

I came back to England at thirty-four years of age, a hardy wanderer, with a long brown beard that seemed lightly powdered with the northern snow, and with the strength of a sea-lion. For the best years of my life I had lived in snow-hives and stone-cabins, or slept at night amidst the wilderness of ice, in a boat which my stalwart shoulders had helped to carry during the day. Heavens! What a rough, unlicked cub, what a grim sea-monster I must have been; and yet Isabel Lawson loved me! Yes, I came back to England to find a fairer enchantress than the spirit of the frozen deep, and to barter my liberty to a new mistress. One of my sisters had married during my absence, and it was at her country house I took up my abode. The young sister of her husband, Captain Lawson, was here on a visit, and thus I met my fate.

I will not attempt to describe her; the innocent face, so lovely to my eyes, was perhaps less perfect than I thought it; but if perfection wears another shape, it is one that has no charm for me. Isabel was my junior by sixteen years, and for a considerable period of our acquaintance regarded me as a newly-acquired elder brother, whose age gave something of a paternal character to the relationship.

For a long time I looked upon her as a beautiful picture, an incarnate presentment of all that is tender and divine in womanhood, and as far away from me as the stars which I pointed out to her in our summer evening rambles by the seashore near our country home.

How I grew to love her I will not ask myself. She was a creature whom to know was to love. How she grew to love me is a mystery I have often tried to solve ; and when I have asked her, with fear and wondering, why I was so blessed, she told me it was because I was brave and frank and true, and worthy of a woman’s love. God help my darling, the glamour of the frozen north was upon me, and the mere story of the wondrous world I knew had magic enough to win me the heart of this angel. She was never tired of hearing me describe that wild region I loved so well. Again and again I told her the histories of my several voyages, and the record seemed always to have a new charm for her.

‘I think I know every channel in Davis’s Strait and Baffin’s Bay,’ she said to me a day or two before our wedding ; ‘and the icebound coast, from Repulse Bay to Cape

Crozier, and the ice-packs over which you carried your boats, and the shoals of seals and clouds of ducks, and the colony of white whales, and the dear little snow-houses in which you lived so snugly. Don't you think we ought to spend our honeymoon at Cape Crozier, Richard ?'

'My precious one, God forbid that I should ever see you in that wild place.'

'Be sure, Richard, if you went there, I should follow you.

And she kept her word,

Dreamlike, and oh, how mournful, seems the bright scene of my bridal day, as { recall it to-night beside a lonely hearth in the house of a stranger. My Isabel looked like a spirit in her white gown and veil ; and I, to whom the memories of the North were ever present, could well-nigh have fancied she was clad in a snow-cloud. I asked her if she were content to have given her young beauty to a battered veteran like me ; and she told me yes, a thousand times more than content—inexpressibly happy.

'But you will never leave me, Richard ?' she said, looking up at me with divine love in her deep-blue eyes; and I promised again, as I had promised many times before, that the North should never draw me away from my beloved,

"You shall be my pole-star, dearest, and I will forget that earth has any wilder region than the woods and hills around our happy home.'

My darling loved the country, and I loved all that was dear to her: so I bought a small estate in North Devon— a grange and park in the heart of such a landscape as can only be found in that western shire. I was rich, and it was my pride and delight to make our home as beautiful as money and care could make it. The restoration of the house, which was as old as the Tudors, and the improvement of the park, employed me for more than a year,—a happy year of home joys with as sweet a wife as Heaven ever gave to man since Adam saw Eve smiling on him among the flowers of Paradise,—and during the whole of that time I had scarcely thought of the North. With the beginning of our second year of happy union, I had even less inclination to think of my old life; for God had blessed us with a son, pure and blooming and beautiful as the region in which he was born.

Upon this period of my life I dare not linger. For nearly two years we held our treasure; and if anything could have drawn us nearer to each other than our love had made us long ago, it would have been our affection for this child. He was taken from

us. ‘The Lord gave, and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ We repeated the holy sentences of resignation; but it was not resignation, it was despair that subdued the violence of our grief. I laid my darling in his grave under the midsummer sky, while a sky-lark was singing high up in the heaven, where I tried to picture him, among the band of such child-angels; and I knew that life could never again be to me what it had been. People told me I should perhaps have other children as dear as this.

‘If God would give this one back to me, He could not blot from my memory his suffering and his death,’ I answered impiously.

For some time my sorrow was a kind of stupor—a dull dead heaviness of the soul, from which nothing could raise me. Isabel’s grief was no less intense, no less bitter; but it was more natural and more unselfish. She grew alarmed by my state of mind, and entreated me to try change of scene.

‘Let us go to London, Richard,’ she said; ‘I shall be glad to leave this place, beautiful and dear as it is,’

Her pale face warned me that she had sad need of change; and for her sake, rather than my own, I took her to London, where we hired a furnished house in a western square.

Being in town, and an idle man, with no London taste and no friends, it is scarcely strange that I should attend the meetings of the Royal Society. The fate of Franklin was yet unknown, and the debates upon this subject were at fever-heat. A new expedition was just being fitted out by the government, and there could be no better opportunity for a volunteer band, which might follow in the track of the Government vessel.

In the rooms of the Society I encountered an old comrade who had served with me in my first voyage on board the ‘Weatherwise,’ and he exerted his utmost powers of persuasion to induce me to join himself and others in a northward cruise, to search for Franklin and for our lost companions of the ‘Ptarmigan.’ I was known to be an old hand, well provided with the sinews of war, adventurous and patient, hardened by many a polar winter; and my friend and his party wanted me for their leader. The proposal flattered me more than I can describe, and caused me the first thrill of pleasure I had known since my son’s death. But I remembered my promise.

‘No, Martyn,’ I answered; ‘the thing is impossible. I am a married man, and have given my word to the dearest wife in Christendom that I will never go out yonder again,’

Frank Martyn took no pains to conceal his disappointment at my decision, nor his contempt for my motives.

It was my habit to tell my wife everything; and I told her of the debates of the Royal Society, and of this meeting with an old comrade.

‘But you will keep your promise, Richard?’ she asked, with a sudden look of fear.

‘Until the end of life, my darling, unless you should release me from it.’

‘Ob, Richard, that is not likely ; I am not capable of such a sacrifice.’

I went again and again to the Royal Society: and I dined at a club, with my friend Martyn, who made me known to his friends, those eager volunteers who panted for the icy winds of the Arctic zone, and languished to tread the frozen Labyrinth of polar seas, I listened to them, I talked with them, and the demon of the North resumed his hold upon me. My wife saw that some new influence was at work, that my home life was no longer all in all to me.

One day, after much anxious questioning, she beguiled me of my secret, The old yearning was upon me, I told her

how every impulse of my mind—every longing of my heart— urged me to join the new enterprise; and how, for her dear sake, I was determined to forego the certainty of pleasure, and the chances of distinction. She thanked me with a sigh.

‘I stand between you and the purpose of your life, Richard,’ she said; ‘how selfish I must seem to you!’

‘No, darling, only tender and womanly.’

Upon my persistent refusal to command the expedition, my friend Martyn was unanimously elected captain. A wealthy brewer of an adventurous turn provided the larger part of the funds, to which I gladly contributed my quota.

‘I know Dunrayne will go with us, said Frank Martyn. ‘He'll turn up at the last moment, and beg leave to join. But remember, Dick,’ he added, turning to me, ‘if it is the last moment you'll be welcome, and I shall be proud to resign the command to a fellow who knows the Arctic zone as well as a Cockney knows the Strand.

The preparations for the voyage lasted longer than had been anticipated. Months went by, and I still lingered in town, though I knew that Isabel would have preferred to return to Devonshire. I could not tear myself away while the ‘Forlorn Hope,’ the vessel chartered by the brewer, was still in dock. I saw the adventurers almost daily, assisted in their preparations, pored over the chart with them, and travelled over every inch of the old ground with a pencil for their edification.

It was within a week of the departure, and the fever and excitement of preparation was stronger upon me than on any one of the intending voyagers, when my wife came to me suddenly one morning, and threw herself, sobbing, into my arms.

‘My dear Isabel, what is this?’ I asked in alarm.

‘O Richard, you must go,’ she sobbed; ‘I cannot hold you from your destiny. My selfish fears are killing you. I can see it in your face. You must go to that wild, awful world, where Heaven has guided you in safety before, and will guard and guide you again. Yes, darling, I release you from your promise. Is God less powerful to protect you yonder than here? He made that world of eternal ice and snow; and where He is there is safety. No, Richard; I will not despair. I will not stand between you and fame. I heard you talking in your sleep last night, as you have talked many nights, of that distant solitude: and I know that your heart is there. Shall I keep my husband prisoner when his heart has filed from me? No, Richard, you shall go.

She kissed me, and fell fainting at my feet. I was blinded by my own selfish folly, and did not perceive how much of her fortitude was the courage of despair. I thought only of her generosity, and my release. It was not too late for me to accept the command of the ‘Forlorn Hope.’ I thanked my wife with a hundred kisses as her sweet eyes opened upon me once more.

‘My darling, I shall never forget this,’ I cried ; ‘and it shall be the last journey, the very last. I swear it, by all that is most sacred to me. There is no danger, believe me, none, for a man who has learned prudence as I have done— in the school of hardship.’

There was only a week for leave-taking.

‘I can bear it better so,’ said my wife; ‘such a blow cannot be too sudden.’

‘But, my darling, it is no more than any other absence ; and, remember, it is to be the last time.’

‘No, Richard, do not tell me that. I think I know you better than you know yourself. A man cannot serve two masters. Your master is there. He beckons you away from me.

‘But for the last time, Isabel.’

‘Well, yes,’ she answered, with a profound sigh, ‘I think that when you and I say good-bye next week, we shall part for the last time.’

The sadness of her tone seemed natural to the occasion ; nor did I remark the melancholy significance of her words, though they often recurred to my mind in the time to come.

‘I will make you a flag, Richard,’ she said to me next day. ‘If you should discover any new spot of land out yonder, you will like to raise the British standard there, and I should like to think that my hands are to be associated with your triumph.’

She set to work upon the fabrication of a Union Jack. I remembered a melancholy incident in the life of Sir John Franklin, and I hardly cared to see her thus employed ; but I could not sadden her with the story, and she worked on, with a happier air than I could have believed possible to her. Alas! I little knew that this gaiety was but an heroic assumption sustained to save me pain.

My darling insisted upon examining my charts, and made me show her every step of our projected journey—the point where we hoped to winter—the land which we intended to explore on sledges—the spots where we should erect cairns to mark our progress. She dwelt on every detail of the journey with an interest intense as my own.

‘I think I know that distant world as well as you, Richard,’ she said to me on the last day of all. ‘In my dreams I shall follow you—yes, I know that I shall dream of you every night, and that my dreams will be true. There must be some magnetic chain between two beings so closely united as we are, and I am sure that sleep will show you to me as you are—safe or in danger, triumphant or despondent. And in my waking dreams, too, dear, I shall be on your track. My life will be a double one—the dull, commonplace existence at home, where my body must needs be, and the mystic life yonder, where my spirit will follow you. -And, dear husband,’ she continued, clinging to me and looking up with a new light in her eyes, ‘if I should die before you return——’

‘Isabel !?

‘Of course that is not likely, you know; but if I should be taken from you, dearest, you will know it directly. Yes, dear, at the death-hour my spirit will fly to you for the last fond parting look upon earth, as surely as I hope it will await you in heaven !?

I tried to chide her for her old-world Scottish superstition; but this speech of hers, and the looks that accompanied it, shook me more than I cared to confess to myself; and if it had been possible to recede with honour, I think I should have resigned the command of the Forlorn Hope and stayed with my wife. O God, that I had done so, at any cost of honour, at any sacrifice of friendship!

But my fate drew me northward, and I went. We started in July, and reached the point that we had chosen for our winter harbour at the end of August. Here we walled our vessel round with snow, and roofed her over; and in this grim solitude prepared to await the opening seas of summer. To me the winter seemed unutterably long and dreary. I was no longer the careless bachelor who found amusement in the rough sports of the sailors, and delight in an occasional raid upon the reindeer of the ice-bound coast. I had indeed tried to serve two masters; and the memory of her I had left behind was ever with me, a reproachful shadow. If, now, I could have recalled the past, and found myself once more by that hearth beside which I had languished for the old life of adventure, how gladly would I have made the exchange!

The long, inactive winter that was so dreary to me seemed pleasant enough to my companions, We had plenty of stores, and all were hopeful as to the exploits of the coming summer. We should find the crew of the ‘Ptarmigan,’ perhaps, hardy dwellers in some inaccessible region, patiently awaiting succour and release. With such hopeful dreams my comrades beguiled the wasted days; but I had lost my old power of dreaming, and a sense of duty alone sustained my spirits. My friend Frank told me that I was a changed man —cold and stern as the veriest martinet.

‘But all the better man for your post,’ he added; ‘the sailors love you as much as they fear you, for they know that they would find you as steadfast as a rock in the hour of peril.’

The summer came, the massive ice-packs were loosened with sounds as of thunder, and drifted away before a southern breeze. But our freedom brought us nothing save disappointment. No traces of our friends of the ‘Ptarmigan’ gladdened our eyes: no discovery rewarded our patience. Scurvy had cost us four of our best men, and the crew was short-handed. Before the summer was ended we had more deaths, and when the next winter began, Martyn and I faced it drearily, with the prospect of scant

stores and scanter fuel, and with a sickly and disheartened crew. We had reason to thank God that the poor fellows were faithful to us under conditions so hopeless.

Before the coldest season set in, we left our vessel in tolerably safe harbour, and started on a land expedition, still bent on our search for traces of the missing Ptarmigan. We had a couple of sledges and a pack of Esquimaux dogs, faithful, hardy creatures, who thrived on the roughest fare, and were invaluable to us in this toilsome journey. No words can paint the desolation of this wild region—no mind can imagine that horror of perpetual snow, illimitable as eternal.

Martyn and I worked hard to keep up the flagging spirits of our men. One poor fellow had lost his foot from a frostbite, and but for our surgeon's clever amputation of the disabled member, must have surely perished. He was of course no small drag upon us in this time of trial, but his own patient endurance taught us fortitude. We had hoped to fall in with a tribe of Esquimaux, but saw none after those from whom we bought our dogs.

So we toiled on, appalled by the grim change in each other's forms and faces, as short rations and fatigue did their work. The dead winter found us again reduced in number. We built ourselves a roomy snow-house, with a cabin for the dogs; and here my friend Frank Martyn lay sick with three other invalids throughout our hopeless Christmas. My own health held out wonderfully. My spirits rose with the extremity of trial, and I faced the darkening future boldly, beguiling myself with dream-pictures of my return home, and my wife's glad face when she looked up from her lonely hearth and saw me standing on the threshold of the door.

It was Christmas-day. We had dined on pemmican—a peculiar kind of preserved meat—biscuit, and rice. Spirit we had none, save a little carefully stored in case of urgent need. After our scant repast the able men went out in a body in search of sport for their guns, but with little hope of finding anything. The invalids slept, and I sat by the fire of dried moss which served to light our hut, with the aid of a glimmer of cold, dull daylight that came to us through a window of transparent ice in the roof.

I was thinking of England and my wife—what else did I ever think of now?—when one of the men rushed suddenly into the hut, and fell on the snow-bank that served for a bench. He was white to the lips, and shivering as no man shivers from cold alone.

'Good God, Hanley, what is the matter?' I cried, alarmed by the man's terror.

‘I went away from the others, Captain,’ he began, in rapid, gasping accents, ‘thinking I saw the traces of a bear upon the snow; and I had parted from them about half-an-hour when I saw——’

His voice died away suddenly, and he sat before me, with lips that moved but made no sound.

‘What? For pity’s sake speak out, man.’

‘A woman!’

‘Yes; and of an Esquimaux tribe, no doubt. Why didn’t you hail her, and bring her back to us? Why, you must be mad, Hanley. You know how we have been wishing to fall in with some of those people, and you see one, and let her slip through your fingers, and come back scared, as if you'd seen a ghost.’

‘That’s it, your honour. What I saw was a ghost.’

‘Nonsense, man!’

‘But I say yes, Captain, and will stand by my word. She was before me, moving slowly over the snow; you could scarce call it walking, ’twas such a smooth gliding motion,

She was dressed in white—no common dress—but one that turns the heart cold only to think of. While I stood, too scared to move hand or foot, she turned and beckoned to me, and I saw her face as plain as I see yours at this moment, a sweet face, with blue eyes, and long fair hair falling loosely round it.

I was on my feet in a moment, and rushing towards the door.

‘Great God of Heaven!’ I cried, ‘my wife!’

The conviction that possessed me was supreme. From the moment in which the sailor described the figure he had seen, there was no shadow of doubt in my mind. It was Isabel, and she only. The wife who had promised that her spirit should follow me step by step upon my desolate journey was near me now. For one moment only I considered the possibility or impossibility of her presence, and pondered whether some northern-bound vessel might have brought her to an Esquimaux station near at hand that we knew not of; for one instant only, and then I was hurrying across the snow in the direction to which the sailor pointed as he stood at the door of our hut.

The brief winter day was closing in, and there was only a long line of faint yellow light in the west. Eastwards the moon was rising, pale and cold like that region of eternal snow. I had left our hut some two hundred yards behind me, when I saw a white-robed figure moving towards the low western light; a figure at once so dear, so familiar, and yet in that place so awful, that an icy shiver shook me from head to heel as I looked upon it.

The figure turned and beckoned. The sweet face looked at me, awfully distinct in that clear cold light. I followed, and it drew me on, far across a patch of snowy waste that I had left unexplored, or had no memory of traversing until now. I tried to overtake the familiar form, but though its strange gliding movement seemed slow, it eluded my pursuit, follow swiftly as I might. In this manner we crossed the wide bleak waste, and as the last glimmer of the western light died out, and the moon shone brighter on the frozen plain, we came to a spot where the snow lay in mounds—seven separate mounds ranged in the form of a cross beneath that wild northern sky.

A glance told me that civilized hands had done this work. The Christian emblem told me more. But though I saw the snow-mounds at my feet, my eyes seemed never to leave the face of my wife—O God, how pale in the moonlight!

She pointed with extended finger to one of the mounds, and I saw that it was headed by a rough wooden board, almost buried in snow. To snatch a knife from my belt, and throw myself on my knees, and begin to scrape the coating of mingled ice and snow from this board, was the work of a few moments. Though it was of her I thought only, yet it was as if an irresistible force compelled me to stop, and to obey the command of that pointing hand. When I looked up I was alone beneath the wintry sky. My wife was gone. I knew then what I had felt from the first—that it was her shadow I had followed over that wintry waste, and that on earth she and I would never look upon each other again.

She had kept her promise as truly as I had broken mine. The gentle spirit had followed me to that desolate world in the very moment it was liberated from its earthly prison.

It was late that night when Hanley and his messmates found me lying senseless on the snow-mound, with the open knife beside my stiffening hand.

They brought me back to life somehow, and by the light of the lanterns they carried, we examined the board at the head of the mound. An inscription roughly cut upon it told us we had found the lost crew of the Ptarmigan.

‘Here lies the body of Morris Haynes, commander of the Ptarmigan, who died in this unknown region, Jan. 30th, 1829, aged 35.’

The other mounds also had headboards bearing inscriptions, which we dug out from the snow on the following day, and carefully transcribed. After this we found a cairn containing empty provision-tins, in one of which was a book that had evidently been used for a journal; but rust and snow had done their work, and of this journal nothing was decipherable but the name of the writer, Morris Haynes.

These investigations were not made by me. The new year found me laid low with rheumatic fever, and Frank Martyn had to take his turn as sick-nurse beside the snow-bank where I lay. Our provisions held out better than we had expected, thanks to the game our men shot, and the patience with which they endured privation. The spring came, and with it release. We contrived to make our way to Baffin’s Bay,—a consummation I scarcely thought possible in my dreary reveries of mid-winter,—and a Greenland whaler brought us safely home.

I went straight to my brother-in-law’s house at the West end of London. He was at home, and came without delay to the library where I had been ushered, and where I sat awaiting him with a gloomy face.

Yes; as I expected: he was in mourning: and behind him came my sister, with a pale face, on which there was no smile of greeting.

Lawson held out both his hands to me.

‘Richard,’ he began in a faltering voice, ‘God knows I never thought it possible I could be otherwise than glad of your coming home—but——’

‘That will do,’ I said; ‘you need tell me no more. My wife is dead.’

He bent his head solemnly.

‘She died on the twenty-fifth of last December, at four o'clock in the afternoon.’

“You have been told, then,” cried my sister; “you have seen someone?”

‘Yes,’ I answered, ‘I have seen her!’

Story Notes

M.E. Braddon's *My Wife's Promise* opens with a richly Victorian fusion of adventure narrative, psychological confession, and domestic tragedy. Told in the first person by Richard Dunravyne, the opening of the tale establishes an immediate tension between two shaping forces of his life: the seductive extremity of Arctic exploration and the counter-pull of domestic affection. Braddon uses this conflict to critique not only the Victorian cult of heroic adventure but also the cost such heroism exacts from private life.

The prose is characteristically lush and emotionally heightened, illustrating Braddon's gift for melodrama without sacrificing psychological subtlety. Richard's voice is tinged with romantic fatalism; he describes his passion for polar exploration as a possession, "a demon of the icebergs," casting the Arctic not merely as setting but as a supernatural rival to his family. Braddon repeatedly personifies the North as an alluring yet destructive lover, which deepens the story's central irony: Richard can and does love his wife deeply, yet his temperament has been shaped to be faithful to something colder and more abstract. This metaphorical triangulation–husband, wife, and the icy North–provides the emotional tension of the narrative.

The domestic sections contrast sharply with the Arctic episodes. Isabel is rendered with angelic tenderness, her loyalty and fear forming the story's emotional core. Braddon's ability to depict the Victorian ideal of womanhood–selfless, spiritual, devoted–while simultaneously exposing its tragic vulnerability is one of her hallmarks. Isabel's release of Richard from his promise, framed as heroic self-sacrifice, is also an indictment of a culture that valorized male ambition over domestic stability. Her prophetic foreboding gives the narrative a Gothic colouring, hinting at supernatural sympathy between husband and wife and casting the expedition in a fatalistic light.

Braddon's descriptive power is evident throughout: from the "deep cold blue of the northern sea" to the oppressive stillness of Victorian drawing rooms, she evokes settings that mirror Richard's psychological alienation. Adventure scenes are brisk and vivid, while scenes of grief–especially the death of the child–are rendered with grave, almost devotional solemnity. This oscillation in tone strengthens the story's exploration of the limits of endurance: Arctic hardship and emotional bereavement become parallel trials.

What gives the narrative its lasting resonance is how Braddon subtly undermines the heroic masculine ideal. Richard's quests bring little knowledge and no triumph, only loss. His achievements are dwarfed by the emotional devastation he leaves behind. The romanticized explorer emerges instead as a tragic figure–capable of loyalty, courage, and tenderness, yet ultimately enslaved by the "glamour" of the North and blind to the suffering he causes.

Overall, the story exemplifies Braddon's ability to merge sensation fiction with psychological realism. It is dramatic yet controlled, sentimental yet sharply critical of Victorian values. Through elegant prose and complex emotional architecture, she frames the Arctic not merely as a physical frontier but as a symbolic space where human devotion is tested, broken, and–perhaps–redeemed.