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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

'I cannot go home,' said Clara in return to Catherine's anxious looks and words; for her face was as pale as marble, and the tears seemed almost to have worn channels in her cheeks...

They slowly reached St. John's where people were already assembling for the last Tenebræ offices; and here Clara seated herself, in that state of calm, exhausted feeling which seemed so thoroughly suited to the time and circumstances...

It was nine o'clock that evening before the procession had gone its rounds, and reached the top of Strada Mercante. On a little heap of stones left by the masons in finishing some reparations belonging to the church hard by, stood a small group looking out for its arrival...

'We have chosen our situation beautifully,' said young Courtney, as the first group of figures, after resting for a few minutes just in front of them, passed on, and made way for the next...

'And is this the Paganism of Malta at which Protestants turn up their noses in such disgust?' were Clara's first words as they turned away from this equally new and touching sight...

'I have heard it said,' said Catherine, that it would be difficult, nay, impossible, for any child to realise the Crucifixion at all without the help of a crucifix...

'I have often cross-questioned the poor here,' said young Courtney, 'for this express purpose, and always found their ideas perfectly clear and intelligible to me, although I can fancy Protestants distorting, in their usual way, their answer into just what they did not mean.'

'I could not help remarking,' observed Clara, 'the white difference in the posture and behaviour of the people when the Blessed Sacrament is passing. There, there is real adoration;—here, there was veneration and quiet respect. This alone ought to convince them, if they were not blind.'

'They are blind,' replied young Courtney, 'and it is darkness that really can be felt. No one could conceive such blindness possible, did he not see it with his eyes.'

'True,' said Clara, 'one can scarcely realize now one's own state of mind as a Puseyite.—What utter blindness possessed one then! One

had not a glimmering of the truth, and could not perceive the absurd inconsistencies of one's own conduct and thoughts.'

'Would you credit a Protestant actually gravely telling me, with a very shocked countenance, that even educated Catholics believe that the Blessed Virgin existed before God?' said young Courtney.

'I don't know. They are capable of any mistake,' said Clara; 'but was this really said to you?'

'It was indeed,' he replied, 'and an instance given of my friend's having asked a Catholic, 'Who existed, God or the Blessed Virgin, since she was the Mother of God?' The reply was, he says, 'The Blessed Virgin.' Of course I told him the Catholic gentleman in question was either an infidel, or else taking the trouble to bamboozle him, and laugh behind his back at his simplicity in believing him so ignorant.'

'And this will probably be a newspaper report story for the next six months,' sighed Clara.—'Oh, when will England open her eyes, awaking from her long dream of willfulness and bigotry, see at last that she has forsaken the fold of Christ, and return once more to the arms of her Mother, so loving and so true?'

'The hour is coming,' replied young Courtney, with a sweet smile. 'The prayers of the Catholic world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary are not offered in vain.'

'She will pray her prayer, and the battle will be won, And the Saviour's sister Mother save the island of her Son!'

'Thank you,' said Clara, gently and earnestly, as she looked up with glimmering eyes; for she thought of Father Aidan—her own Alan—and she knew he was almost equally dear and ever present to the thoughts of her companion likewise, at that and every other moment.

Holy Saturday dawned; the sun seemed struggling to come forth from the stray clouds that checked his passage and seemed to say, 'No, no; to-morrow—to-morrow!' St. John's was again crowded to see the lighting of the paschal taper, and the blessing of the font; and as the twelve prophecies were being slowly read, Clara's heart repeated again and again: 'Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus,' and longed and longed again for the moment when the half-decked and still darkened church should prepare for the coming of the Lord. The Litany at last began, and the procession moved into the sacristy. There was an evident perceptible bustle and preparation going on; the crowd below kept wailing slightly to and fro, and the excitement seemed complete when the Bishop put his attendants approached to the altar clothed in white. The beautiful words of the Litany proceeded,—'Cn, iste audi nos: Christe exaudi nos.' The Bishop bent and kissed the altar; there was a moment of silence, and then his low and trembling voice was distinctly heard even at that distance, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo.' A man next Clara, who seemed absorbed in what was to happen, touched his child at that moment. 'Adesso,' murmured he, in a low tone. As if by magic, all the curtains that darkened the windows were flung back at that instant; the purple veil fell from before the marble figures of the Baptism of our Lord, the light poured in volumes over the crimson hangings of the nave, letting floods of sunshine into the darkened building; the bells, small and great, thundered forth one incessant peal, almost drowning even the loudest swell of the organ, as all the bells in Valetta took up the sound, and even the distant cannon announced that the Church was celebrating the first Mass of the Resurrection!

Clara felt her whole frame thrill as she stood and gazed at the scene before her, lost in wonder and delight; but how much more full was her joy when she knelt at the full well of the Sanctus, feeling that the moment was at hand, and the same burst of joy welcomed again to His altars her risen and glorified Lord! Then came the tiny Vespers, the triple Alleluia; and she wended her way along the teeming streets, feeling as she could scarcely wait till the next morning again to converse 'face to face' with Him whose absence seemed to have been so unbearably long. And, oh, who but a convert can tell the peace and delight of that calm Easter eve of preparation, or understand the tears of silent joy that made their way down her cheeks, as with slow step and bent head she in her (narr left the confessional and made her way to her accustomed place to gaze again on the Tabernacle clothed with white, the decked altar, the lighted lamp, in expectation of the coming morrow, and contrasted all this with the last Easter eve or dreary loneliness, or even the one before that, when she had experienced all the joy that any thing short of the Catholic Church can afford?

The Pater Noster had tolled the hour of four the next morning, but it was indeed 'yet dark,' when Clara stood by Catherine's bed-side; and as she threw her arms round her neck, she murmured the first Easter salutation, 'Catherine, Christ is risen. Alleluia, alleluia!'

'We were always to have gone on to Italy at this time, you know,' said Catherine; 'besides,

dearest Clara, are you not in a state of health to do anything where such a dreadful disorder is raging? I should have thought one attack of it had been enough for you.'

'I know it is God's will,' said Clara, 'and I am quite content, mamma 'cara,'—for so she sometimes called Catherine,—'you know I never had a call to an active life; my longings always led me to the contemplative; and even in this hour of her need, Malta can always have my best. If I cannot work for her, I can still pray. So now,' she added playfully, 'we will think of beautiful Naples, whither we are steaming; you know they say, 'Vedi Napoli, e poi, mori.''

'There was a sudden change in her manner as she uttered the last word, as if this well-known saying had just struck her in a very different light, and slowly and thoughtfully she again leaned over the side of the vessel. Catherine perfectly understood her thoughts, and willing to hinder her from brooding over ideas of this kind, she introduced another topic.

'We may possibly meet the Mervilles there,' said she.

'Converted by this long expected termination of the Gorham affair,' replied Clara, in a tone of deep hope. 'I wonder what Mr. Wingfield is doing? Since Elizabeth Dalton refused to write to me till I had repented of the great sin I had committed in being converted, I hear nothing of him.'

'My aunt only mentions having written to l'Abbe des Genettes to have him prayed for at Notre Dame des Victoires,' said Catherine.

'I can never doubt of a conversation that is asked there,' remarked Clara. 'I do not think I could ever doubt of the conversion of that poor Mr. Hawkins, who insisted they were grinding Judas's bones outside of the church-doors on Good Friday, if he were prayed for at Notre Dame des Victoires.'

'Judas's bones, Clara,' replied Catherine, 'what do you mean?'

'Did I not tell you Mr. Courtney's adventure?' said she. 'Mr. Hawkins, his Protestant friend, assured him very gravely that that kind of rattle they used instead of the bells after they are silenced on Holy Thursday was people going about pretending to grind Judas's bones in a machine for the purpose. You know he was always making one laugh, though one felt so sad all the time, at the ridiculous mistakes English people at Malta make, and go on believing, for lack of taking the trouble to ask the first Catholic that comes in their way to explain it.'

'I am afraid they are glad to believe any evil story,' said Catherine sadly; 'one is forced into thinking theirs is not the charity that 'hoppeth all things, beareth all things.''

Clara sighed heavily, looked up into the blue sky above, and was silent.

A lovely cloudless morning it was that saw the travellers enter the far-famed Bay of Naples; very soon Clara was obliged to confess that the views about that enchanting of enchanting spots on earth even far exceeded the walk on the upper Barracca at Malta, which she so much delighted in. Sorrento was their summer resting-place, and as the autumn drew on they removed into lodgings in the Riviera di Chiaja, just opposite one of the gates of the beautiful gardens that run along the sea-side round the bay, and are the resort of every idle or invalid person in Naples at set times, whether English or Italian. Catherine had purposely chosen this situation; for Clara's strength was rapidly giving way, and a stroll in the retired walks of these beautiful pleasure grounds was very often all she was now able for. A little chapel close by was her usual haunt, where, amid the fishermen that that thronged it, she seemed to fancy herself again in her dear Santa Maria di Gesù. But this was a very different winter from the last. She suffered much, and her constant cough was sadly trying, though she still continued her 'daily Food,' and when Catherine saw plainly that what she had said was true, and her day after she had stayed away from Communion was invariably far worse than when she had braved the doctor's orders and gone out before breakfast to church, she ceased all expostulations, and yielded the point.

Distressing news, however, reached them about this time. They accidentally saw in the newspapers the death of Mildred's two little children within one week. Poor Clara wept bitterly—more indeed at the grief of the parents, and the manner in which the intelligence had reached her, than the fact of two more little angels having been received into Paradise; for, as Mr. Wingfield had performed the ceremony, and she had been present, and full well remembered every particular, she could have no doubt as to the validity of their baptism. And yet there was hope and joy mingled with her grief; for she could not but see the Hand of God chastening severely those whom He loved. For the children there was no sorrow; they were only gone to intercede for the conversion of those to whom they owed their existence before the Throne of God. She wrote a most affectionate letter to

Mildred, hoping that sorrow might have softened Douglas's heart, and still more so when a letter from Father Aidan said that he had ventured to call at Osaburgh Terrace when he knew Douglas out, and described the soft and chastened grief in which he had found Mildred plunged, and the overflow of kindness and love with which she had received him.

This letter arrived towards the end of November, and was balm to Clara's anxious heart, though she never for instant doubted as to their ultimate conversion; it seemed as if God's promise were past to that effect, and she were hastening onward to fulfil her part of the compact.—She now spoke openly to Catherine of what possessed her mind; and even Catherine felt it was true, as all medical efforts to check her cough had failed, and day by day her strength declined, and her cheek became more imbued with the beautiful hectic bloom and transparent whiteness of the insidious disease that was bearing her to the presence of her divine and adored Lord.

It was in the evening of that very day that Father Aidan's letter had arrived that she thought she could bear a turn in the Chiaja gardens, and leaning on Catherine's arm had slowly passed along one of the side-walks, and seated herself at last on one of the numerous benches to be found there for the accommodation of invalids. People were passing and repassing, and amongst them two figures that struck Clara's eye the instant she saw them. They were slowly walking along in the deepest and most earnest conversation; the eyes of the one fixed on the ground, while his companion's arm was passed affectionately within his, and he seemed earnestly conversing with him on a point that appeared to concern the happiness of both.

'Is it possible?' said Clara, half to herself, as she looked intently towards them; 'can it be possible, or are my eyes grown dim?'

'What?' said Catherine, who had been occupied in defending her from every breath of air that even that beautiful sunny Naples day could bring to hurt her, and had remarked nothing.

'It is,' said she; 'Catherine, it must be—it is Mr. Wingfield walking there with Mr. Merville.'

She was not mistaken; and in another minute Mr. Wingfield was seated beside her, his hand in hers, with such a mingled expression of sorrow and joy on his feeling countenance that it was almost too much for her; while Mr. Merville stood before her, so struck with her altered appearance, that for a few moments he could not utter a word. His manner was kindness itself; it almost seemed to ask forgiveness.

'I thought Italy was to have re-established your health,' said he; 'but you seem to me worse than even when I last saw you. Tell me, really, how are you?'

'Going home very fast,' said Clara, looking up with one of her own sweet, bright smiles, though her eyes wore a calm loveliness Mr. Wingfield had never seen her with.

Mr. Wingfield looked at her for a moment, and seemed greatly moved.

'But this is such an unexpected pleasure,' said she; 'it almost makes me feel quite well and strong. How long have you been here? We did not even know you had left England.'

'We only arrived yesterday from Rome,' he replied; and then he stopped and looked earnestly at her. 'And now, Clara, shall I tell you what will give you still more pleasure? You must not fear me any more; a week before we left Rome we too were admitted into the Catholic Church. Thank God you did not follow my blind advice I so long gave you, but found better and truer guides, who have His authority to command you in His name.'

Clara could not speak. She looked at him again and again; the cup of her happiness wanted but one more element to make it brimful; one of her most ardent prayers she was, then, allowed to see fulfilled.

Catherine began to fear the effects of her emotion. 'She must not talk now; you must come this evening, all of you, when she is better,' she said, her own eyes full of tears; 'joy is sometimes more tiring than sorrow.'

It was leaning on Mr. Wingfield's arm that she reached the door of their lodgings, and slowly ascended the steps that led to her apartment; and that evening was spent lying on the sofa by the fire, listening to the details of his conversion. Another pleasure awaited her; for who should come in with Mr. Merville but their old friend young Courtney, who was to depart the next day, by way of Rome, for England, and was little aware till that evening that his Malta friends were in Naples.

'And so you have been on a pilgrimage since I saw you,' said Mr. Merville to him; 'and now you are going home in good earnest for ever.'

Young Courtney glanced at Clara, but replied in a moment, 'Exactly so; I have been spending some weeks in retreat with the Jesuits on Mount Lebanon, and now I must do work, I have been idle long enough.'

CHAPTER XXX.—HOME.

'Now the long yearnings of thy soul is stilled: Home! home! thy peace is won; thy heart is filled. Thou art gone home.'

Felicia Hemans.

We have not much to relate ere our heroine bade her last farewell to Malta, and strained her eyes to watch its light blue form hovering on the horizon till it was lost in the distance, and then murmured to herself, unconscious that Catherine was standing close beside her, smiling and listening,

'Ah! know you that bright and southern isle, Lying cradled in ocean's azure smile, With its gleaming walls, and its sunny sea? Mary's own island—the flower of the sea!'

'Yes, I do,' said Catherine; and Clara turned half round, and continued, half-gaily, half-reproachfully, 'Yes:—

'I know it! I know it! 'tis bright and fair, But the banner of death is hovering there; And we must away, ere the daylight flee, From Mary's own island—the flower of the sea!'

'Farewell to thee, then, sweet Mary's home! No more mid thy children of faith may I roam; But the young convert's first love will ever be thee,

Our own Mother's island,—the flower of the sea!'

'But you are going to see sunny Italy,' said Catherine playfully; 'and you regret that little old rock in the middle of the ocean.'

'True,' replied Clara still sadly; 'but it was my first Catholic home—the first Catholic country I ever saw; and now it seems so cowardly to run away from it in its moment of sorrow, because the cholera has broken out.'

'We were always to have gone on to Italy at this time, you know,' said Catherine; 'besides,