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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

The first bell rung out at this moment, and the door of the church was thrown open. A few solitary figures made their way up the gravel walk and ranged themselves on the benches...

'I could look at Magdalen forever,' said she earnestly; 'Nothing pleases me in Oxford like Magdalen.'

Her observation interrupted the train of Alan's sad thoughts. He had been gazing at the long loved scene in all its rich beauty, as if taking his last look: for he was going to accompany them to London the next day, uncertain whether he ever returned.

'Yes; he advances in grace; but there is the emblem of a higher life. How stern and lone is the spire of St. Mary's! How richly adorned the tower from which it springs! And so God would have us put off those earthly affections wherewith he has so richly blessed us, and arise from them to a life of stern loneliness, where, stripped of all but Him, we may live to Him alone.'

Clara understood him but too well: she heaved a deep but suppressed sigh, and said no thing.

'Do you go with us to-morrow to London, Alan?' said she at last, in a voice of affected indifference.

'Yes,' he replied; 'and I have partly told Douglas the errand that carries me hither.'

'What did he say?' asked Clara.

'He was greatly grieved, and tried to reason me into what he called my 'right senses'; and then he put before me all the ties of home and friends and country to retain me. He asked me whether I had no more love for what was once so dear to me—honors at Oxford, the Anglican priesthood. He seemed to think me bewitched.'

'And have you no more love for them, Alan?' exclaimed Clara passionately. 'Oh, you know not the agony you will cause to those you leave behind—'

She had no sooner uttered the words than she deeply repented them. She felt that she had wounded him deeply—that she had added another pang to his already lacerated spirit; and she stopped abruptly. Alan made a violent effort to be perfectly calm; but he spoke in a voice of intense sorrow.

'O Clara, I thought you would have understood me better!'

They had reached the end of the Botanic Gardens, just beyond Magdalen College. Douglas and Mildred were looking back for them to join them. He stopped short.

'I can't come home this evening. I shall see you in the morning; go and join them, Clara.'

She clung to his arm. 'O Alan, do not leave me in anger!' 'I am not angry, Clara. I could not be angry. I only cannot come home this evening. Pity me, and pray for me.'

He hastily left her, passed the iron gate of the meadows, and in an instant had disappeared into the Merton Walk.

He walked on a quick pace, unconscious of anything around him, turned into the Long Walk, then cut across towards Folly Bridge, and round the meadows by the water's edge. The river flowed silently along; gay skiffs were gliding upon it;—he had so often rowed there in younger and happier days!

'I am ready,' said he, as he rose, and pursued his way slowly and thoughtfully along the winding path back to the Long Walk. 'Farewell, loved Oxford;—he again stopped and leaned against a tree; witness, ye ancient shades, how I love thee still! Farewell, first love of my boyish years, dear nurse of my boyish ambition! There is none left now who can understand what unseen power drags me from thine arms, and throws me forth on an untrod, unknown system, to wake up, perhaps, too late, and find myself a heart-broken exile, banished for ever from home and thee.'

He looked up. Their overhanging branches in the dim twilight sent a sensation of awe through his over-excited mind, and they seemed to wait, like the guardian spirits of Oxford, over her prodigal child. 'Farewell,' he repeated, as if in answer; 'farewell for ever! Yes, mysterious form, be continued, with a sudden start, and quickly pursuing his road along the avenue, 'I follow thee! Thou beckonest me onwards with thy words of motherly tenderness and authority. On! on! I follow thee; 'come weal, come woe, in life or in death, I am now thine!'

He reached the cloister-gate, and paced up the dim arches, crossed the small quadrangle, and found himself in Tom Quad once more.

A gay whistle saluted his ears. He tried to escape, but it was impossible; the young man hailed him as he tried to pass unnoticed in the increasing darkness.

'Halloa, Leslie! is that you? What are you doing here so late? And what are you in such a hurry about?'

'I might ask the same of you, Courtney,' said Alan, with as much cheerfulness as he could assume. 'Where are you going at this hour? I am bound to my rooms.'

'I was going to see Henley,' replied the other carelessly; 'but that will not hinder me from walking a little way with you,' he added, turning and putting his arm within Alan's. 'I wanted to ask you whether all the reports I hear about you are true?'

'What reports?' said Alan, mauling himself for any thing that might come out.

'First, is it true that you are going to leave us to-morrow?' asked he.

'It is true that I am going to accompany my sister to London,' he replied; 'but what of that?'

'Why, they say your friend De Grey has been leaving no stone unturned to pervert your mind since his conversion,' replied Courtney; 'and that you are now going up to London to be admitted into the Catholic Church, with your sister and brother's wife, De Grey having paid you a visit in the country and succeeded in perverting their minds too.'

'What a tissue of falsehoods!' said Alan indignantly. 'I have not even heard from De Grey but once, a few days ago, since I left Ox-

ford. De Grey has never done or said any thing to persuade any one of my family or myself to take the step he has done. I am not aware any one of them knows him even by sight.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Courtney; 'I always liked your friend De Grey's looks.' This was true, and Alan moreover knew that Courtney, though still so very young and thoughtless, had taken some trouble to make his acquaintance at a time when others were shunning him. 'Then I hope we shall see you back very soon among us,' said he, stopping, and warmly shaking hands with Alan; 'and I will take good care to contradict these foolish reports. I am very glad I have met you.'

Alan hesitated a moment. 'No, Courtney,' said he at last; 'say all you like about De Grey, but do not mention me in any way.'

Courtney seemed struck. 'Why,' said he anxiously, 'since there is no cause for them?'

'I did not say there was no cause for them,' Courtney replied Alan. 'I can trust you, Courtney,' added he hurriedly; 'spare me any more. I have suffered deeply. I must still suffer much.'

Courtney stood silent a moment. 'I am young, Leslie, I know. I have not studied these things; indeed I know nothing of them. But let me entreat you not to be rash.'

'No, Courtney, I have not been rash,' said Alan sadly, but firmly. 'Farewell. We may not meet again in this world. Think of me sometimes—may I say with indulgence still!—Do not let anyone warp the good judgment and kind heart God has given you when I am gone. Farewell, dear Courtney.'

He wrung his hand, and hurried away. Courtney stood looking after him. The whole thing was a mystery to him; but he truly loved Alan.

'Never did there beat a kinder or more earnest heart than that!' murmured he, as he silently turned to retrace his steps. 'How I shall miss them both!'

CHAPTER IX.—A SAD RETURN.

'Thy treasured hopes and raptures high, Unnumbering let them go; Nor grieve the bliss should quickly fly Which Christ disdained to know.'

The journey to London was a sad and silent one. Alan did not see them till the hour for the departure of the train was come, and then there was only time to hurry down to the station. Every one looked constrained,—Douglas hurt and vexed and cold; Mildred sad and thoughtful, but gentle as usual. Alan's face wore a fixed expression of sorrow, which he now did not attempt to conceal. Clara's only spoke of the heavy heart within. The one subject seemed to be avoided by common consent, and no one made any remark even when, at the London station, Alan, after seeing them into a carriage, put his own things into another cab, Clara was standing at the door of the cab in surprise while the last arrangements were being made. He put his head in at the door.

'Good by, Douglas,' said he, in a tone of un-mixed sorrow.

They silently shook hands; Mildred did the same, with an expression of deep concern; and then came Clara's turn.

'O Alan, where are you going?' she now exclaimed.

Alan glanced at Douglas, and hurriedly kissed her in silence.

'Alan!' she exclaimed again, 'when am I to see you again? We cannot part thus.'

'I don't know—I cannot tell,' said he, almost overcome. 'I cannot be with you in London. God bless you, dearest Clara.'

She would have detained him; but he broke away, jumped into the cab, and motioned to the man to drive off.

Clara stood for an instant looking after him, hurried into the other carriage, and, regardless of everything around her, buried her face in the corner, and burst into an agony of tears.

The New Road seemed endless. Park Square was passed, and the cab turned up Osnaburgh Terrace. Clara had not looked up; but now, soothed by Mildred's tender manner, and the tears she saw glistening in her eyes, she recollected that she was making an unhappy scene just on her first arrival at her new home, and roused herself so far as to decently composed when the door was opened; and with smiles and curtsies the servants stood ready to welcome the bride. Letters were lying on the drawing-room table; there were several for Mildred and Douglas, and one for Clara, with the Ashton post-mark, but in a strange hand. Clara retired to a window and hastily broke the seal. The others were too busy with their own letters to observe her silence; for Mildred was gaily calling on Douglas to laugh over one she seemed greatly to enjoy, and he was smiling as he never smiled to any one but her, as he leaned over the back of her

chair. Clara's figure at last attracted them.—She was standing leaning against the window, her hand, with the open letter, hanging listlessly by her side, and her head resting on the wall.—Every particle of color had left her cheek, and she looked like some marble statue of grief, her bonnet fallen at her feet, and her travelling wrappers hanging negligently around her. Mildred looked alarmed, and went up to her. She allowed her to seat her in a chair without resistance, but nothing but the same fixed, pale look of grief was the answer to Mildred's tenderly-repeated question: 'Dear, dear Clara, what is the matter? Tell me what is the matter?'—till suddenly, a flood of tears coming to her relief, she exclaimed in a voice of agony: 'O papa! dear papa!' and sank on Mildred's bosom.

'What is it, Clara?' said Mildred. 'May I read the letter?'

'Oh, yes; he is ill; said Clara, sobbing convulsively, 'very ill; and I was not there! He cannot even write. Oh, read it, and see what Mr. Wingfield says. I have scarcely read it; I could not.'

Douglas took it from her hand. It was as follows:—

'Ashton-le-Mary. 'My dear Miss Leslie,—I little thought when I arrived here this morning that I should have the sad task of telling you of the illness of your dear father. I passed here on my way back from—shire, and was greatly grieved to hear from Mrs. Selwyn that Mr. Leslie was suffering. I went directly to the Rectory, hoping I might be of use, and found he had been ailing ever since you went away with a severe cold and cough, and that he had become suddenly worse the day before. He asked me to write to you, but not to frighten you, and direct my letter to Osnaburgh Terrace, as you would be there the next day. He thought he would like you to shorten your visit in London. I think the fear of spoiling your pleasure at Oxford has hindered him from mentioning his illness before; and it is but right to say, that I think the sooner you return to Ashton the better, as it may be long before he gets over a severe attack like the one he has gone through.'

'Praying that God may support you in all the trials He sends and bless them to your eternal good, believe me, in Him, yours very faithfully, 'C. R. WINGFIELD.'

Douglas's voice was only interrupted during the reading of this letter by Clara's suppressed sobs. Douglas cast a glance of deep anxiety at Mildred, who watched his countenance. They both knew well what an inflammation of the chest with Mr. Leslie was, and they were fully aware of its danger.

'Cheer up, Clara,' said Douglas; 'you must not give way so. I do not think he is so very ill.'

Clara shook her head, shrunk away, and clung close to Mildred.

'O Alan! Alan!' said she, her sobs redoubling.

Clara had never opened her mind to her elder brother; he was rather an object of awe to her. Mildred understood her better, and she cast a significant look at him.

'Leave us,' said she in a low tone; and he instantly left the room.

'Dearest Clara,' said she soothingly, her own tears falling fast, 'put your trust in God. He never willingly afflicts; whom He loveth He chasteneth.'

'O Mildred!' said Clara, 'I could bear this were Alan here; but why did he send him away to that cruel manner? Oh, papa would not have done it, dear, dear papa! But you will understand me now.' And she raised herself, and turned away with a fresh flood of tears.

'Dearest Clara, what do you mean?' said Mildred half reproachfully. 'Do you think that a few days can change a friendship of years, or that I am not your friend any longer because I am Douglas's wife,—your very own sister?'

Clara had already repented. She threw herself back again into Mildred's arms.

'Oh, no, Mildred; I only thought you would think all Douglas did right. Alan would never have left me in that way had not he told him he must not see me.'

'But, dearest Clara,' said Mildred, 'could he do otherwise? He knows your ardent disposition; he knows Alan's immense influence over you; and when he was aware of the dreadful step Alan is seemingly about to take, could he allow you to go on associating with him—at any rate for the present—till you had your father's sanction for it. Remember, you are under his guardianship here, as long as you are away from your father. Dearest Clara, be reasonable; do not look at only one side of the question.'

'And do you think, Mildred,' said Clara, 'that not seeing Alan will have the smallest influence in keeping me from joining the Church of Rome? Are you aware, Mildred, that I have known Alan's state of mind these three months.'

Mildred looked graver, and still more sad. 'No, I was not aware of it, Clara; you never told me.'

'I suppose you will think he was wrong to let me see it,' said Clara.

'I must think it was ill-advised, dear Clara,' said Mildred, with a sigh. 'Would your father have liked it, had he known it, Clara?' said Mildred tenderly.

Clara burst again into tears. 'O papa, papa! dear papa! O Mildred, I dreaded this. I knew it was coming; I felt it; but I did not think it would come in this way.'

'Do not give way in this manner, my dearest Clara,' returned Mildred; 'put your trust in God; there is still hope.'

'No, no,' said Clara again, 'there was one thing I dreaded, and it has come. The shadow of this sorrow has been over me long. I have no hope.'

Mildred bent over her. 'Be it so; but have you forgotten that if we are without chastisement, then are we bastards, and not sons.'

Clara became gradually still; a new train of thoughts seemed passing over her mind. The burst of natural, unchastened grief had found its remedy. She murmured half aloud, 'Yes, yes—'

'Oh, shame upon the listless heart, So sad a sigh to heave, As if thy Saviour had no part In thoughts that make thee grieve. Youth's lightning-flash of joy secure Passed serious o'er this spright,— A well of serious thought, and pure, Too deep for earthly light.'

'Then grudge not thou the anguish keen, That makes thee like thy Lord, And learn to quit with eye serene Thy youth's ideal board.'

'Thy treasured hopes and raptures high, Unnumbering let them go; Nor grieve the bliss should quickly fly Which Christ disdained to know.'

Mildred pressed her closer and more tenderly to her bosom, feeling that she now indeed had an elder sister's charge over this young, ardent, trusting, but inexperienced and unchastened heart; and she ardently prayed that she might be enabled to perform to her the part of the mother she had never known.

Clara was now perfectly still. She lay with her wet cheeks and her long tearful eyelashes resting upon them, her head lying on Mildred's arm, her features gradually brightening; and Mildred could almost read one by one the several trains of bright and glorious things that were floating before her—till a half smile dawned on her lips.

Douglas at this moment entered, with an inquiring look.

'She is better now,' said Mildred.

And Clara opened her eyes and put out her hand, and then flung her arms round his neck, as if to ask for forgiveness.

Douglas kissed her with more tenderness than usual.

'Clara,' said he, 'I have been giving all the necessary orders. The train starts at three; shall you be ready?'

'Thank you, Douglas, thank you,' said she clinging to him; 'forgive me for having been a cross.'

'Cross, Clara? what about?'

But Mildred's glance stopped him, and he added: 'Come, you must try and eat some luncheon, and then by that time the carriage will be here.'

Clara turned sick at the thought of luncheon; but there was no help for it,—she could not resist trying to eat; and in an hour's time they were again on their way to Ashton.

The brief October evening had long set in, and the cold wind was sighing through the trees ere the station was reached. Clara's eagerness grew with every moment. She could with difficulty wait while the luggage was thrown on the carriage, and in a very few minutes they were off.

The three miles seemed endless; and Mildred did not even hint at stopping at the lodge for a moment to see her mother, when she saw Clara's state of agitation. At last the lights at the Rectory appeared in sight; they drove up the sweep, and in a moment Mrs. Wallis stood at the gate. She had heard the carriage wheels, and opened the door just in time. Clara hastened out, and threw her arms around the old servant's neck.—The poor old woman could scarcely find words to answer her eager question.

'How is papa?' she drew back and looked in her face; it conformed her fears. 'Is he worse? Sarah, tell me, am I too late?' she exclaimed, in terrified accents,

'A kind touch' was laid on her arm, and a gentle voice said close beside her: 'Do not be alarmed; God may still spare him to you; he is a little more easy just now.'

She turned round.

'O Mr. Wingfield,' she said, bursting into tears, 'I am so much obliged to you.'