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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

Clara did not answer. She was not quite prepared to say there was no profanation; but she mused over the shudder with which she had once seen the Sacred Elements split between the awkwardness of the clergyman and the comminatory at Margaret Chapel, and how she had watched to see whether he would return to repair it; but no, he had passed on with a sorrowful look. It would have made too much fuss, or been too open an avowal of his creed, and what he believed to be the precious Blood of the Lord of Glory lay neglected on the chancel floor!

'And now, is there anything else that puzzles you,' asked Father Raymond, 'and that you would like to ask me?'

'I do not understand,' said Clara, 'how one can merit heaven.' She took out her pet *Horæ*. For instance, there are prayers I have never yet been able to use; such as those which beg we may obtain our requests by the merits of the Saints. How can we reach heaven by the merits of St. Peter and Paul?'

'Here, again, I think I see at once your peculiar difficulty. Those merits, the merits of all the Saints, even of the Blessed Mother of God herself, whose merits are they in reality? Of ourselves we have nothing, nothing but sin; but through the all-abundant infinite merits of the God-Man, Jesus Christ our Lord, our poor good works, which of themselves are so imperfect and mixed with evil that they would never gain heaven, have an inestimable value placed upon them in the sight of God, and so we may be said to gain Heaven—to merit Heaven.'

'But can any one have merits more than enough to save himself?' interrupted Clara, eagerly.

'We have all a debt of sin to pay,' replied Father Raymond, 'and somehow that debt must be wiped out, or the justice of God cannot be satisfied. Yet you will agree with me, I suppose in saying that some have a larger amount of sin than others to expiate. St. John the Baptist, for instance, was sanctified and full of the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb, yet his life was one of intense self-denial.'

'And St. Aloysius Gonzaga,' said Clara, looking up eagerly—'he who had but some few words, uttered when he was not aware of their wrong meaning, to mourn over as sin.'

'And St. Aloysius Gonzaga,' proceeded Father Raymond, with a smile. 'They had no sin to expiate; their accumulated merits then,—all the austerities they practised over and above what the law of God required,—what were they?'

'I see,' said Clara,—'works of supererogation; a light is beginning to dawn over my mind, and I think I see the place our Lord holds in the Catholic system. He stands, as it were, in the midst; and in Him, by Him, through Him, for Him, are all things. He is the foundation, the great foundation, which stretches through it all; and all this is but the beautiful superstructure—I see now—necessarily following upon the carrying out of one's principles. You are not always speaking of it, because it is the first principle inculcated,—a matter of course, that every one knows.'

'Exactly,' replied Father Raymond.

'One thing more,' said Clara: 'this is all very well for saints, men of such wonderful austerities; but for such as me! I have read of the balance of the sanctuary, wherein after death one's good and evil actions are weighed, and as the balance turns, so is the judgment pronounced; and I have trembled, I have shuddered, at the thought. The evil actions, alas! they are easily discovered, they stare me on every side; but the good ones, the merits, where are they? I do no penances: I perform no austerities; I have no good works, and even the very few that I can discover, for what motives were they done? What vanity was mixed up with them? Alas, they must take their place in the opposite scale, they are so alloyed and tarnished. If I were to die to-day, how would my balance turn? Where is the merit to counter-balance the heap of sin?'

She spoke with an effort, but quite fearlessly, the crimson spot gathering in her cheek, and her eyes fixed on the gentle countenance of Father Raymond, as if her doom was to issue from his lips.

'Merit can be gained at every moment,' he replied, so gently, and yet so earnestly. 'God does not require such penances and corporal austerities from every one: some few only are led by these extraordinary ways. Every act of conformity to His will, every prayer we breathe, act of faith, or hope, or love to Him are counted as merits by Him. You are forgetting, my dear child, that of themselves they are nothing, worse than nothing; that it is only through the

infinite merits of the Son of God that they are available before Him.'

'I see,' said Clara again, 'united to His merits; we make our morning oblation of ourselves and all we do in union with what He did and suffered. This is, then, what is meant when spiritual books say that an action of itself is "lead;" united to His "it is as though lead were did into molten gold, and so invested with the beauty and preciousness of the gold."'

'Exactly,' said Father Raymond.

'And then for those who die without the whole punishment due to sin being performed in this world?' said Clara inquiringly.

'There is purgatory,' replied Father Raymond.

'Yes,' said Clara: 'I quite understand.—How beautifully the whole Roman system fits in together!'

Father Raymond smiled.

'It does, indeed,' said he; 'and the more you see of it, the more you will admire it, and acknowledge that the Hand that formed it is Divine. Take away one piece, and the whole is spoiled; a link in the chain is wanting. Even infidels are obliged to acknowledge that it is the most beautiful piece of human invention the world can show; it bears on itself the very marks of Divinity. And now, is there any other point you would like explained?'

Clara blushed.

'I am afraid I have still a great many Protestant prejudices against the worship of the Blessed Virgin,' she replied; 'at least, I am afraid of the abuses to which they say it leads on the Continent. I once thought much of Saints and Angels, and my heaven, I believe, consisted in meeting and seeing them; and now I so fear one iota of my heart's devotion being alienated from Him whom I would love above all things in this world. I so fear again lowering my sight one moment from Him, and turning up in my hopes of heaven any thing but the one hope of viewing Him in His beauty, of being absorbed in Him, that I shrink from a system where it would seem as if Mary, all holy and blessed as she is, is almost as much looked to and invoked as her Divine Son.'

'Put away all such fears, my dear Miss Leslie,' said Father Raymond; 'when you know what our Lord is to the Church, you will see how impossible it is for any creature to fill His place in the heart. He is the Uncreated Beauty. Mary is the work of His Hands; but a glorious and perfect work, unmarred by sin. Remember all the Saints who have written in glowing words of Mary, have written far more glowing ones of Jesus. St. Bernard says, "by Mary to Jesus;" and as for "abuses abroad," of which you hear so much, the whole amounts to this; the southern character is entirely different from ours and they show their love for our Lady in a way which Protestants utterly misunderstand. There is exactly the same devotion felt for her by Catholics in northern countries; only they don't show it in the same vehement way. It is just in the same way as in human affection; you will see it shown quite differently by an Italian and an Englishman.'

'And then,' said Clara anxiously, 'you are sure the ignorant understand as you do?'

'Yes,' said the priest, 'the ignorant as you use the word; for the Catholic Church is the home of the poor,—she has not one doctrine for the rich and another for the needy,—To the poor is the Gospel preached. The very simplicity of the poor enables them to receive the doctrines of the Church with more faith. They know what Mass is; they know what the Blessed Sacrament is; and they never dream of exalting the Mother of God above God. It is not the educated who are to have an especial privilege to understand the Faith, dear Miss Leslie. 'Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to little ones.'

There was a short pause, and then Clara gratefully thanked him for his kindness, and rose to take leave. He looked at the little *Horæ* he still held in his hand, and said, as he returned it to her, 'I think I must give you something that will explain much of what we have been speaking about, as a companion to that favorite volume of yours.' He went into the shop, and returned in a few minutes. He held Challoner's Catholic Christian Instructed, and assured her she would find much that was useful in so small a compass.

'I see you have been procuring a Missal,' he added, with a smile; 'this will explain a great many of the ceremonies you may not understand.'

Clara gratefully thanked him. 'I have read so few Catholic books,' said she; 'they are very difficult for me to procure in my situation. One I have been very busy with during the last two months is Lingard.'

There was another smile; and then, as she placed her hand in his to bid him good by, he added, 'let me again entreat you not to forget

to pray. Reading is of very little service; prayer is everything. Pray to God to enable you to understand things in their right light, to open your mind to the truth. As I began so I would end,—by entreating you to pray earnestly, fervently, humbly.'

Clara was greatly touched by this reiterated entreaty to pray for guidance—so different from the conduct she had been led to expect from Roman Catholic priests. The tears gushed into her eyes. 'Indeed I will.'

The shopman entered, whispered a few words, and disappeared.

'I am called to attend another case of cholera,' said he, 'who knows which of us may be the next called away?'

She knelt for his blessing. It was given in English, affectionately, but in a very solemn way.

'Whenever you wish to see me,' he added, 'unless something unforeseen occurs, this man is quite to be trusted, and will fetch me here at any time to meet you. God bless you.'

The young priest left the room, and followed the person who was waiting outside to conduct him to the chamber of death. Clara caught a sight of his tall figure as they dived down a small lane; and, with a sigh she could not repress, she hurried off, on her way to Ashton-le-Mary.

CHAPTER XXI.—THE APPROACH OF CHOLERA.

'I could sit and sit and weep  
O'er my heart's sorrow;  
But on Thine Arm Thou didst sleep,  
And wait Thy morrow.'  
Isaac Williams.

All was bustle at the Lodge as Clara made her way up the shrubbery. Servants were running hither and thither; every one wore an air of consternation.

'What is the matter?' asked Clara, as she hastily ascended the steps of the house, and addressed a maidservant who was standing wringing her hands in the doorway. 'Sarah, what has happened?'

'O miss!' said the woman, as soon as she could speak, 'the cholera, the cholera, I shall die of fear.'

'Who has got it?' said Clara. 'Speak, Sarah, tell me, I entreat you; for the woman was relapsing into her old procyonism of fear.—Not Mrs. Selwyn!—not your mistress?'

'No, miss,' said an old manservant, who came up at the moment; 'it is poor Martha. She was taken frightfully about an hour ago, and my mistress is going to leave the house at once.'

'Where is she,' said Clara, quite unmindful of the last part of the sentence. 'Have you sent for the doctor?'

'Yes, miss,' said the man. 'I told Joe to go off for him at once; but my mistress is in such a fright, she will not stay a moment in the house, and every one is busy taking care of themselves.'

Clara answered not, and walked quickly towards the maid's room, where loud groans were audible. Sarah caught her, and sought to detain her by passionate remonstrances on the danger of infection. Clara turned back for one moment and there was a look of calm indignation in her face, as she replied,

'Sarah, my life is in the hands of God. Go with your mistress; I will stay and nurse Martha.'

In another minute she was by the sufferer's side. Her skin was livid, her mouth half open, and every instant she was violently sick, but she was quite sensible.

'Has nothing been done for you, my poor woman?' said she, as she hastily attempted to address the sufferer.

A sigh was the only answer.

She remembered the cholera medicines which had long been in the house in case of need. She looked for some one who would fetch them; the old manservant alone stood near the door, and she told him exactly where he could find them. Her thoughts were with Father Raymond as she hastily administered the laudanum and brandy that were brought her, and with beating heart she heard the ring at the door that announced the doctor. He looked grave, but surprised, and asked in a gentle tone whether she was the only attendant Martha had.

At this moment Mrs. Selwyn's voice was heard in loud tones in the hall.

'Where is Miss Leslie?'

'She is gone into Martha's room,' was the reply, and Clara listened eagerly for the answer.

'Into Martha's room?' exclaimed Mrs. Selwyn; 'she will give us the infection. Is the carriage ready, John? I must be off immediately.'

Clara closed the door; she would not hear any more,—for she had heard enough,—and returned to Martha's bedside. It was but for a moment, for she knew it was the time for action. Not an instant was to be lost, and she rose prepared for the worst. She now heard John's voice.

'Is Mrs. Selwyn gone?' she inquired.

'There is no one left but me,' returned the old man; 'and now, Miss, let us see if we can do anything.'

'God will reward you,' said Clara, deeply touched, with a grateful look that went to the heart of the old man.

All was now done that could be done, and all through that long weary night did Clara sit by the dying woman, with her own hands performing the offices that her state required. She had sent John to the Rectory almost immediately on the first remedies being applied; he had not seen Mr. Middleton, but Mrs. Middleton had spoken to him.

'She seemed as panic-struck as my missus,' said the old man, shrugging his shoulders, when he returned. 'Heaven knows whether she will tell the parson.'

'It won't be much good if she does,' sighed Clara, as she thought of the pompous manner of the gentlemanly Mr. Middleton, and the frigid distance at which he would keep the dying woman, did he even make his appearance. Would he confess her? Never. Would she be willing or able to confess between her ignorance and pain? And then, where was the Vatican, or Extreme Unction? 'Ah,' sighed she, as she bent over the now fast-fading countenance, 'if she were but a Catholic, all this would not be to be learnt now.'

She could but commend the poor sufferer to the mercy of God, and attempt to lead her mind to penitential thoughts, and trust in the merits of Him who had died for her on the bloody tree; and the thought forced itself on her mind, that were she herself the next victim to this frightful disease, she would have to die as devoid of priestly and sacramental aid as the poor unconscious being before her.

The evening closed in; night came on; the wind howled fearfully through the old trees, and the last scene was fast coming to a close. Midnight struck, and Clara, with streaming eyes, sat watching and soothing the dreadful death-agony of the poor woman. There were some fearful convulsions, and then the arms relaxed, and with a deep groan the trembling spirit took its flight. There lay the disfigured corpse in its still gloom, and by it knelt the small fragile figure who was to be the victim of her self-devotion. Twelve hours after Martha had breathed her last, Clara herself,—in her turn attended by her old nurse, Mrs. Wallis, to whose ears it had an hour before come that her darling nursing had remained alone at the Lodge,—lay on the same bed of sickness. It would be too long to describe the agony of the poor old woman, or the pious horror with which she received Clara's mention of Father Raymond's name.

'Ye dinna mean the Popish priest at Ashton Market, miss,' said she.

'Yes, I do,' replied the suffering girl. 'When John goes for the doctor, he can stop at the Catholic chapel on his way. Bid John come here—this is no time for trifling; I will tell him myself.'

Poor Mrs. Wallis left the room, amazed at her countenance, and we know not what would have been the result of this request, had not a carriage at this moment driven up the sweep.—There was a ring at the door, a quick step on the stairs, and in a moment Clara was clasped in Catherine Temple's arms.

'O Catherine,' she exclaimed, trying in vain to disengage her burning head from her friend's bosom, and put her away from her; do not come here; you too will catch this dreadful disorder.'

'Clara' was the only answer, in half-reproachful tones, 'are we not in the hands of God?'

'Oh, yes,' sighed the exhausted girl, as she sank back on her pillow, and looked with unutterable affection on the anxious expression of Catherine's face as she bent over her.

'I heard you were left alone,' said she, 'and I came instantly. Mr. Leslie would have come for you, but I begged to be allowed to take his place. They did not tell me that you yourself were attacked.'

'I was not till within an hour two,' replied Clara; 'and now, Catherine, and she clasped her hands, and burst into an agony of tears, 'I may die, and this question is not settled.'

'Clara,' replied the low tones of Catherine's earnest voice, 'can God abandon those who have sought him truly? If your hour is come, these clouds of doubt and darkness will be dispelled; but something tells me that it is not yet arrived. He yet intends you to live and find what you have been so anxiously seeking.'

There was a deep faith in Catherine's earnest mood; she left the room, wrote a few lines, and directed John to take the carriage which stood still at the door, and drive instantly in search of the doctor, and from thence to Ashton Market; and then reassuring the poor frightened Mrs. Wallis, she directed all the well-known remedies for cholera to be applied without delay. Clara seemed to draw strength from her calm self-possessed manner and her tender words.

By the time Catherine had returned to the room, even she perceived a marked difference in

her manner, and when, after half an hour had elapsed, the doctor had arrived, there was already good hopes that the disease was arrested in its progress. She determined, therefore, when Father Leonard arrived, not to allow her to see him, for fear of influencing her mind when under the fear of death.

After the lapse of an hour John returned, but that morning Father Raymond had been suddenly summoned elsewhere. A message, however, from Father Raymond, the priest of the church, reassured Catherine that, if necessary, a Catholic priest could be instantly summoned. For the present Catherine saw no need; the alarming symptoms were for the moment stopped; the laudanum even was taking its effect, and Clara was tossing to and fro in a disturbed and agitated doze. The doctor left the house, desiring to be sent for if the smallest symptoms of the disease returned, and Catherine remained that night beside the couch of her suffering friend. Slowly and gradually she recovered, and in three weeks she was able to leave her bed and lie on the sofa in the drawing-room. The subject of religion had never been broached; kind letters had arrived from Douglas and Mildred—but nothing more. Clara seemed to be always absorbed in thought. She could read little, but Catherine saw that she prayed much. One bright May morning her long sofa was drawn close to the window, the rose-colored curtains threw a glow on her thin pale face, and Catherine, delighted to see her looking so much better, sat down beside her with her work, unwilling to interrupt her train of thought.

'Catherine,' said she at last, in tones of agitation, though she strove to be calm, as she raised her dark eyes to read into the depths of her friend's soul. 'Catherine—' and there was a long pause.

Catherine met her look, and laying down her work, seated herself in front of her, and smoothed down the thin white hand she laid in hers with a smile.

'Have you anything to tell me, Clara?'

'Yes,' replied Clara, but her heart beat fast; 'perhaps you may have guessed it?'

'Is it that the grand question is settled?' said Catherine,—'the great knot cut? You doubt no longer what is the Will of God for you?'

'I do doubt no longer,' Catherine replied Clara; but her eyes filled with tears as she looked earnestly at her friend.

'Thank God!' replied Catherine.

Clara looked puzzled.

'You mistake me, Catherine. Listen to me,—do not interrupt me. You know how long I have doubted the Church of England; how long I have struggled against these doubts. I have sought to stifle them by affection, by duty, by trying to forget them. In vain; they haunted me on every side, till I was convinced that I was attempting unwittingly to stifle the Voice of God. What led to this certainty is too long to tell you now. I need only say that God guided me into the hands of Father Raymond. I have only seen him twice; but he explained more for me in those two half-hours I spent with him, than I could have worked out by myself in as many months. My last interview was the day before I fell ill of the cholera. I have left off reading since; for he bade me do so; and I have done as Alan did when he told me, "Prayer must now cut the knot he could not unravel." Day by day a conviction I cannot express has stolen over me; I want no more arguments; I am sure;—nothing will shake my confidence now; I feel that God has given me a gift I had not before—the gift of faith! No one can know, Catherine, what that gift of faith is until they have experienced it—it is the gift of God alone; and now it seems as if the time was come. I feel as if I can part with all for God—all—even you, Catherine.' But here the pink color deepened, and the dark eyes filled with tears. 'He calls me; and be it where it may, I will arise and follow Him. Catherine,' she added, and more earnestly, 'will you hate me when I am a Catholic?—Will you love me still?'

It would have been difficult to describe the feelings of tearful gratitude and tenderness that swelled the heart of Catherine Temple in that moment, as she folded Clara to her bosom, and whispered, in a voice choked with emotion,—'Clara, my darling child, I too am already a Catholic. God has deigned to look upon me, unworthily, and give to me too the gift of faith.'

Clara raised her eyes one moment to her friend's countenance, as if to read there the truth of such sweet words. She burst into tears; and as she threw her arms round her, she could but murmur, 'Oh, how good God is!'

Catherine let her weep; the emotion would otherwise have been too strong for her enfeebled frame, and she mingled her tears with hers.

'Ah, Catherine! Clara exclaimed at length, 'now at last you are no longer an enigma to me. I now understand the look of sorrow and the altered expression since—is it not so?—and she