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CLARA CHILLINGTON; OR, THE PRIDE OF THE CLIFF.

A STORY OF ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

BY

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CHAPTER XII.

RIGHT OR WRONG?

The flickering rays of the firelight fell feebly on the oaken panels which formed the wainscot of the boudoir of Clara Chillington. This apartment, though small, was elegantly furnished, and still retained traces of having been used as an oratory in the monkish days of the Priory. This latter fact did not make its character more inviting, and as the lurid rays fell on the wainscot, the furniture of the room seemed to dance in such vagaries as might have filled a superstitious mind with awe. The window of this room overlooked the front of the Priory, and down the park-like slope leading to the distant road. Evening was approaching, when Clara, absorbed in a deep and painful reverie, stood looking on the Priory grounds. The day had been cold and cloudy, and as with increased strength the biting north-east wind came sweeping over the plain, the snow-flakes began to fall thick and fast. The coming darkness produced an increasing sorrow within the mind of Clara, which at length began to brood in horror over her soul. The desire she possessed for companionship had that evening become so intensified as to overwhelm her power of resistance, and leaning her beautiful forehead against the diamond-shaped panes of the casement, she thought of her departed mother, and wept. How natural that the motherless girl, feeling herself to be alone in the world, should turn her thoughts toward one whose kindness lingered in her memory as though it were a pleasant dream, a beatific vision that some rude hand had swept violently from her mind. During that reverie the soul of Clara had ascended far away from the Priory, far away from earth.

Whatever is the human soul, there is a beneficence in the almost ubiquity of its character, that affords relief to sorrow by the power it enjoys to leap the chasm of distance, even though it should be so great as from earth to heaven. Possessing this faculty heaven is near to the good; and through this means the denizens of uninterrupted bliss draw nigh to earth's children in the hour of their affliction and sorrow. The soul leaping forth on the wings of Faith, flies across the boundary line of life, whither mortality cannot follow, and the child of Time holds intercourse with the beings of eternity.

That evening Clara had thought of her mother, and to her excited imagination she seemed to be present with her, and standing ready to listen to her sorrowful tale. Into a mother's ear she whispered the narrative of her loneliness and sorrow, and in fancy she felt again the delicate hand of the departed press her heated brow, and the warm touch of maternal tenderness again planted on her cheek. The mind of Clara was tossed on the waves of mingled feelings rushing tumultuously through her frame, and when excited to a condition that seemed no longer bearable, she was summoned again to real life by the sound of voices, and the tramp of footsteps without.

It was Christmas Eve: and they who seek to make a trifle of money by arousing human recollection from the entrancing influence of worldliness, to consider the happy season and its associations, were gathered in front of the Priory. They had come as heralds to announce the approach of the anniversary of the natal day of the Divine man who spent his life in laying the basis of a moral epoch that shall ultimately see the human race bound together in peaceful fraternity, and ignorance and superstition swept from the minds and doings of men. It is unwise to be too severely critical on the motives prompting the doings of mankind. Men do not always understand the motive which prompts them to action, and a grave authority declares, "Happy is the man who condemneth not himself in the thing which he alloweth."

The persons collected in front of the Priory at that hour were probably not altogether unconscious of Him whose praises they had come to sing; although by more abstract and hypocritical minds a devotedness both to Apollo and Mammon might have been discovered in their endeavours. Gathered from the cobbler's stall, the tailor's board, the baker's oven, and the ploughman's team, the Waits were at the door. For months those performers had been employed in striving to produce a kind of harmony between their rude instruments and ruder voices. Twice a week had they met in a barn, and by the feeble light of a tallow candle striven hard to make themselves masters of the old fugue tunes descended to them as an heirloom from their ancestors. Frequently during their rehearsals had they stopped in the midst of a stanza to congratulate each other on a nearer approach to harmony,

or to correct some trifling error. With patient eagerness had they toiled their way toward a degree of perfection, and clarinet and flute, trombone and bassoon, together with the singers, had each one submitted in meekness to receive censure and correction, in their ardour to do the thing—well. But the time for the public performance of their patient and labourious rehearsals had now arrived; and in the hope of being encouraged by reward to further endeavour, as well as to do honour to "My Lady," the Priory received their first visit.

Being assembled, therefore, beneath the window of the apartment of Clara, and all things being ready, the instruments sent forth the sounds of "Squeak! Crash!" and then arose above the noise of wood and brass the human voice, singing with all the energy that could be commanded. The song they sung was quaint in its rhythm, yet there can be no mistaking the fact that its poetry can be appreciated by the people, nor that it is capable of stirring up their purer emotions. It is a song that has so fastened itself on the memory of the masses as to bid defiance to time to remove it. Time has produced far more classical and artistic efforts, and with time they have departed; but when shall, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," leave the popular mind of the English nation? It is the Christmas song of the people, and from age to age they will conserve it.

Borne on the rising gale, the rude sounds of rustic harmony permeated the narrow casement against which Clara was still reclining, and as she heard the quaint words,

"To you in David's town this day,
Is born of David's line,
A Saviour—"

her heart leaped with delight, and she felt that in Him she had a friend.

She stood in need of a friend, although at that moment she was not aware that the demand was quite so urgent. Yet as the singers, who having finished their task were leaving the grounds to regale themselves from her bounty within the Priory, the heiress of that domain felt that she would gladly exchange her lot for theirs. This feeling, one of such apparent dissatisfaction, she was labouring hard to subdue, when she heard the sound of footsteps approaching her apartment. At first she thought it to be those of her old servant returning from the singers with "Thanks to my lady for her goodness," but the heavy tread quickly told her that it was Sir Harry himself. The heart of Clara sunk as he drew nigh; for she felt that he was coming to her in an angry mood, and the probable cause of his indignation was suggested by her own thoughts. It was seldom that the baronet was at home at such an hour, and when he was he seldom sought the company of his daughter.

Without standing on ceremony, Sir Harry, in the usual rudeness of his manner, entered the apartment and strode forward to where Clara was standing. Commanding her feelings she accented him with,

"Good evening, Sir Harry: I offer you the compliments of the season."

Without uttering any reply to the salutation and kind wishes of his child, the baronet seated himself; and fortunately the gloominess of the room concealed his malignant aspect from her, who, trembling from agitation, now requested permission to ring for candles.

"Permit me to ring for a light," she said; "I should have called for one earlier, but I have been indulging in a brown study."

"The light is sufficient," he replied; and then turning to her, in a voice husky from indignation, he enquired, "Clara, have you any regard for the happiness of your father; do you love me?"

It was a strange question, and on hearing it she started in surprise. Yet strange as it appeared to her, it had been made a subject of thought before he uttered it. The object in thus addressing his daughter was the hope that in the fondness of her heart she would return such an answer as should preclude all possibility of objecting to what was to follow. But to his enquiry she replied,

"Why do you ask me such a question?"

There was a pause in the reply that penetrated the indifference the baronet had always shown her. The innocence of that enquiry pierced his heart, and reflection struck a scintillation on his heavy brain, that produced the thought, "Why should she?" A momentary pause followed this question, and the baronet felt his first stroke had been parried by a guard he had not thought of. Returning to the charge, he continued,

"I have no reason for supposing you do not, still the question is not an unnatural one for a father to put to his child."

The heart of Clara whispered, not an unnatural one for a father, but you have been neither father nor guardian to me. But it was not to her heart that she had now to listen; there was design in the question; she saw through it, and replied,

"Certainly not; nor do I hesitate to reply in the affirmative."

"I am glad to hear you speak thus; and you will admit that the first duty imposed on filial affection is obedience?"

"When the precept is right, most decidedly."

"But who shall be judge of right or wrong in the exercise of parental authority?"

"In the absence of any positive standard the thing itself to be done, or the motive urging the doing of it."

"Should not the absolute will of the parent be deemed sufficient to command the obedience of a child?"

"When that will demands what is reasonable and right."

"Then a father must be provided with an elaborate reason for all he wishes his child to perform?"

"Blind obedience is not imperative on the part of a child, if, on reaching years of maturity, there is sufficient reason for concluding that the command is wrong either in motive or effect. Would you have a child perform intelligently or mechanically your injunction?"

"What matters?"

"Only this; that in one case the thing may be performed so carelessly that it had better been left undone; while in the other, the matter to be done being understood, and a reason for doing it afforded, the honour of the performer becomes associated with the right discharge of the duty."

This truth convinced the judgment of Sir Harry, but only to excite him to greater fury; and as many others on whom truth is forced unwillingly, when argument failed him he resorted to sarcasm and authority.

"Most elaborate!" he exclaimed; "I should think you to have been reading up the subject of filial obedience."

"I simply speak what my reason and feeling prompt me to, and without any preparation."

"Admirable reasoner! but on this subject my opinion happens to differ widely from your own. To command is mine, and your implicit duty is to obey my will. This is the old fashioned way of doing things, and it is my intention to adhere to it. Now it happened a short time since, no matter where, nor from whom, that I heard you have been seen in company with some beggarly plebeian by the name of Freeman. I do not enquire if what I heard is true, as I have the fullest confidence in my informant, and I command you, on the penalty of my severe displeasure, that the like shall not occur again."

"Sir Harry, you need not be frightened to enquire of me if what you have heard is true; as in avoiding to do so I feel that you suspect me capable of equivocation, or of speaking falsely. I scorn such practices, and assure you that your information is correct."

"Do you intend this declaration as an act of defiance?"

"Such was not my intention; but pardon me if before I yield to your imperative command I solicit a reason for your objection."

"Madam, I shall not condescend to reason with you on the subject."

"Then I am to do your bidding, right or wrong."

"Do you impeach the integrity of my wishes?"

"I do not; I simply request of you a reason for your demand."

"My will is your only law."

"When that will is righteous."

"Can't! righteous or not is no business of yours."

"Sir Harry, my father, my desire is to render you that obedience it is the duty of a child to perform, but pardon me if in this matter I request of you a reason for so doing."

"You will obtain none other than that it is my will."

"Is your objection the result of acting from mere caprice?"

"Would you, Clara, associate yourself with that beggarly wretch, and thus disgrace the family of the Chillingtons?"

"Have the Chillingtons ever been so famous?"

"What! has it come to this that you despise the honour of the family?"

"Pardon me, but the honour of our family is dear to me, although we may not take the same view of what it should consist. In my opinion, true greatness is not alone to be derived from birth, or wealth; but that he is the truest nobleman whose life is compatible with the dignity of his being."

"Fine talk, truly; and pray, madam, who has been your instructor in such profound ideas of what is true nobility? I presume that, anticipating my objection to your conduct he, who would seduce you, has been filling your mind with these romantic notions."

"Sir Harry, you permit your prejudice to carry you away to calumniate the innocent."

"Innocent! he innocent! a wretched fortune hunter, who seeks to disgrace us in alliance with himself."

"Charles Freeman has never sought to unite himself with the Chillingtons. It was by accident we first met, and since then I have always found him far too honourable to intrude his presence on such society, falsely termed his superiors?"

"Who is this Charles Freeman?"

"You, Sir Harry, know best, I simply know

him as being an intelligent and agreeable person."

"Agreeable to you, minx!" replied the baronet, wrathfully, for his feelings were now excited beyond control; "but I will take care that for his presumption he shall become disagreeable enough to himself."

"Sir Harry, hear me, nor seek to distress the innocent."

"Innocent! am I again to hear that word? The serpent has cast on you his fascinating glance, and you plead for the wretch who would crush you in his folds. I demand of you from this hour that you never see him again."

A pause succeeded this stern demand; and as the fitful light from the wood burning in the grate cast its reflection on the countenance of Clara it was easy to see the strong emotion aroused within her. All fear of the tyranny of the baronet had passed away with the debate, and she felt urged by a secret vow to contend for liberty and happiness in the choice of a husband.

"Do you hear my command?" inquired Sir Harry, annoyed by the silence of his child, and as he spoke he arose and strode toward where she was standing.

"Do you force me to speak?" was the reply.

"I demand of you an answer."

"Hear me, then. Does Sir Harry Chillington think the so-called plebeian origin of Charles Freeman a sufficient reason to restrain the exercise of the affections of one who has only seen nobility as an empty sound, a gilded envelope to cover a blotted copy of humanity? Had it been your desire that I should entertain ideas of the divinity of aristocracy would you have neglected my education, shut me up in solitude, and subjected me to what you are now pleased to term plebeian influence? It is impossible! The change which has passed over your mind is merely capricious, and will some day, I trust, give way to purer thoughts. I had a mother, Sir Harry, who was born beyond the pale of the sacred enclosure, and the lessons of her life have proved to me that worthy humanity can live outside the circle of nobility."

"Do you reproach me?" exclaimed the baronet, now more furious than ever; "that mother of yours was—"

"Your wife," meekly suggested Clara.

"My wife! a woman imposed on me by a wretched father for the sake of her wealth."

"Good heavens! what do I hear? Is it possible that one who ever called himself a husband, and who now demands of me the reverence due from a child to her parent, can speak so cruelly of the sainted dead—of his wife—of my mother? Can it be that one so good, whose name should have been embalmed in a grateful memory with the purest recollections can only dwell there as a disgusting remembrance?"

"Your mother, madam—"

"Was imposed on you for her wealth, you have told me; and the noble Sir Harry Chillington accepted her for no other reason than that she was rich."

There was now a calm dignity in the manner of Clara which made her father pause in the midst of his rage. His rude nature had thrown itself inconsiderately on the resources of a superior mind, and wounded from the effort, he now exhausted his fury in impotent anger. Having somewhat recovered his feelings he once more repeated his commands, and still claimed the right of controlling his daughter. This persistency caused Clara to say:

"Sir Harry, it is painful to me, and heaven alone knows how painful, but I feel it to be a duty I owe both to myself and you, to inform you that, in opposing your wishes, I am but obeying the behest of a dying mother. Deeply do I deplore that your persistency forces me to inform you that my sainted mother, whom you left unattended by your presence in her dying moments, as though careful to the last for the happiness of the child she was leaving behind without a protector, called me to her bedside, and said: 'Clara, I am leaving you; my life since my marriage has been one of unmitigated sorrow. I had not sufficient strength of character to resist being made a victim to my wealth, and my happiness was sold from me. My marriage with your father was a forced one, and the consequence has been a wretchedness, that is now to terminate in a premature death. My child, profit by my condition, and resist all attempts that may be made after my departure to force you to marry for the sake of title or wealth one you cannot love. Seek a person worthy of your affection, even should his social position not be equal to your own.' These, Sir Harry, are the words of your dying wife, of my dead mother. You have compelled me to tell you them, and, by the side of that bed on which she breathed her last, I vowed to carry out her wishes, nor shall I break that vow."

"The curse of beggary is inherent in your constitution," fiercely rejoined Sir Harry; and, as he spoke, being intoxicated with anger, he lifted his hand as though he would smite his daughter. But Clara was now fearless, and, fixing her eyes on him, she subdued his brutal design, and replied:

"A golden beggary." But Sir Harry did not hear the words, for his own tumultuous passions deafened his ears to every sound, and, as he strode from the room, he exclaimed:

"Obey my commands, or you shall both suffer."

When the baronet had left the room, Clara, who had strengthened herself to resist his imperative command, sank exhausted to her seat, and gave vent to her feelings in a flood of tears. There could be no sympathy in her heart to-