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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

CHAPTER XXVI.—THE CATHOLIC REST.

"How happily the days Of Thalaba went by."

Southey.

And so Lent passed rapidly on. Day by day the young convert was to be seen wending her way to the little church of Santa Maria di Gesu; and poor Maltese who frequented it knew her light step and slight form, and instantly made way for her when she appeared to kneel in her accustomed corner near the altar-rails, and smiled in recognition and interest as she thanked them for their courtesy in her low sweet tones, or by her mute looks. Hour after hour she would remain there untired; it seemed as if the love she bore Him Who dwelt within that Tabernacle could never be satiated, and that it overflowed upon every member of His mystical Body—upon every one united to her by the bonds of the mystical unity of the Saints. She felt that in every Catholic she had a brother or a sister—a member of the same Body; and that feeling which she had begun to experience towards the small portion of the Church of England that she could feel communion with in her Puseyite days, was now extended and deepened to every living soul around her. She knelt at the same confessional, was guided in the same manner, and adored in the same full faith the presence of the Lord of Hosts. Unity was no longer a beautiful dream; it was a seen and felt thing. Each day, in her mysterious communion with the Lord of the Church, she seemed to enter more and more into the world unseen; and for hours, day by day, she would meditate upon the words 'one Body,' 'one Head,' till the fear she had once had of giving the love she owed to Him to another, in honoring His Virgin Mother and the Saints, passed away like a dream, and she saw that a light on this point was communicated to those within the fold, which the stranger and wanderer cannot have till made a part of the mystical Body towards which he is yearning and tending. And here too she learnt to pray for those who were left behind her; here too she learnt that their salvation indeed depended on her; she learnt to aim at perfection for the love of them as a secondary motive, to sanctify herself, and cut off every imperfection that might render her less pleasing in the eyes of her Heavenly Spouse, that He might the more readily hear the ardent yearnings that reached His Sacred Heart day by day for the lost and loved ones. Then, as the afternoon drew on, when the walk with Catherine was over, and the morning had been spent in quiet, unless some grand function was to take place, she sought her other favorite haunt—the side-aisle of St. Dominick's, where the white cloth on the altar-rails and the ever-burning lamp betrayed the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. This, too, was the resort of the poor; and the good lay brothers in their white dresses knew her place, and smiled as they brought the chair for her to lean against, and loved to see the devotion and recollection of her motionless attitude. Catherine joined her shortly before benediction, and then, when dusk came on, they walked home together, sometimes in company with young Courtney, if he happened to be sallying forth from the convent of the church-door at the same time. And now the retreats began in all the churches one after another; and how delightful this time was to Clara, one may easily imagine. The retreats in Italian and English were conducted at the Gesu, and Courtney took good care to inform her that one of the Italian preachers would be a Capuchin.

"Catherine!" said Clara, one beautiful night, as they walked with the stream that was issuing from the Gesu down Strada Venova home,—"what a very scene of romance was that church to-night! How every power of the soul is used and sanctified in the Christian Church, instead of being allowed to run wild at will, and carry its owner to perdition and error! I never saw such a scene, as the shadows of the building grew longer and longer, and twilight stole on!"

"It was very beautiful," said Catherine; "I could not help thinking how struck you would be."
"The crucifix as large as life," proceeded Clara, standing in front, with the form of the preacher, wrapped in his Jesuit cloak, below.—The altar, with its two solitary tapers in the distance; and before us, in the length of the long-drawn aisle, all those kneeling figures, the red coats of the soldiery mingling with the black faldettes of the Maltese, and the European costumes behind. Then the chanting of the one verse of the 'Miserere,' and that low, dull murmur that followed it, as the burst of eloquence with which that Jesuit priest placed before one, as if it were really happening at the moment, the awful scene that follows the instant of death, died away in the murmur of supplication. I could not look up; I hid my face, and I thought

I was in the only chamber of death I have ever seen. O Catherine, how little I knew what was then passing—what was then bursting on the view of the asked, disembodied spirit! At that instant he knew that the Catholic Church was the Spouse of Christ; that the flames of Purgatory were a reality,—a tremendous reality. O Catherine! the thought was too terrible; and then I thought I heard Alan's broken sobs once more, and the words he uttered beside that still and beautiful corpse. Ah, Catherine, could I have such hope for Douglas and Mildred? Are they as single-minded and as truly in invincible ignorance as he was? Would they, and do they, as readily follow the truth the moment they have a glimmering of its reality?"

Clara said no more, but Catherine saw she had been deeply affected. She could not tell her more, nor say how she had knelt on as the preacher resumed his discourse, on the cessation of the 'Miserere,' and the candles on the altar were being one by one lighted for the benediction that was to follow, and her whole soul had risen in one concentrated prayer for the conversion of her brother and sister. She could not even tell Catherine how she had offered all that was dear to her—her health, her dearest hopes, her life—to obtain this grace from God for them; nor how she had felt that her offering was accepted. An interior voice had whispered that her life would be the price of the boon she asked. She could not tell how she had knelt before Him whom her soul loved, verily present, and coming forth from His resting-place; and amid the swell of the organ, the burst of the triple ascription of praise to the One and Undivided True God,—

"Genitori, Genitrici
Laudis et jubilatione
Salus honor, virtus quoque
Sit et benedictio!
Procedenti ab utroque!
Compar sit laudatio. Amen."

—the clang of the bells, and the stifled murmur of awe that seemed to thrill through the Church, a vista of suffering had opened before her—her portion of the chalice of the Son of God—instead of her fond dreams of cloisters and hours of prayer, and the hard, tranquil austerity of a Poor Clare. The whole extent of the sacrifice was before her; calmly, gladly she resigned it, the sweet vision of years, and bent to receive in that blessing the seal of her self-immolation.—And the seal was given; for an ardent desire to make that sacrifice filled her soul, overflowing it with a joy unutterable that He had deigned to call her to it.

Palm Sunday came, and the converts were all to be found for the ceremony of blessing the palms of St. Johns. All who have attended the functions in that sanctuary of the old Knights of Malta know the beautiful decorum with which each ceremony is performed there, and can enter into Clara's breathless listening to the chanted gospel, thus heard for the first time. The deep bass that uttered the words of the Son of God, and the higher voices that took the parts of the disciples; the high priest; the chorists that intervened, representing the cries of the people; the solemn pause that announced the death of the Son of God—made an impression that could never be forgotten. It was like a meditation; the whole scene of the Passion seemed to come before her mind in its vivid reality. She followed Him to the garden, saw Him apprehended and led away captive, heard the denial of St. Peter, felt heart thrill at the murderous cries of the mad multitude; and when in that sudden silence she knelt before His cross, it was with Mary at her side, and her tears flowed with hers over the still corpse of the world's Redeemer. Tuesday and Wednesday, as the silence and gloom of the Holy Week gathered closer in, again and again was this treat repeated. And now Clara's wish was to be fulfilled. She was to be present at one of the far-famed 'Miserere' offices, which she had so often repeated at dead of night alone, or in the company of some of her Puseyite friends, and read of in books of travel, till her childish heart turned to listen to 'the wail of the disembodied spirits' that constituted the 'Miserere,' and the heart-writhing lament of the prophet Jeremiah.

"They say the Tenebræ at St. John's are the second best in the world," said young Courtney—who had quietly and unobtrusively been performing every kind of little service for his friends during this time when people of all kinds are crowding to see the ceremony of the Catholic Church, from motives of every opposing description—as they accidentally met at its outer door of St. John's just before the office began.

"The Sixtine of course being the first," replied Clara, "you are spoilt, having heard the best first."

"It is not quite fair," he replied, "upon our poor St. John's; is it?"

"This will be my first Catholic Easter," said Clara. "I suppose it will be very different joy from our Puseyite Easters, although those were very happy days."

"Somebody you are very fond of said," replied

young Courtney, "that his first Holy Week and Easter after becoming a Catholic was what he could not even have imagined as a Puseyite, and I suppose no one recited offices or kept Lent more perfectly out of the Catholic Church than he did."

"I suppose not," said Clara. "But here we are at the door."

"I have got seats for you up in the gallery over against the altar for to-morrow's ceremony," said young Courtney; "the nave will be too crowded, I am afraid. Of course you mean to gain the plenary indulgences."

"We mean to try for the one connected with the visit to the seven churches," replied Clara; "are there any more to-morrow?"

"There is a plenary indulgence for any one communicating to-morrow morning, and also for an hour's watching in the sepulchre," answered he.

"The sepulchre!" said Clara, looking rather puzzled; "is not to-morrow Holy Thursday?"

"Yes; but the Blessed Sacrament consecrated to-morrow is exposed for the adoration of the faithful in each church, in a chapel which is called the sepulchre. You will understand it better to-morrow."

And with a smile they parted—the ladies to one side of the church, and young Courtney to rejoin Mr. Merville, who was waiting for him to act the cicerone in the minutæ of the office, at the other side of the building.

They passed in, and Clara was struck dumb with the metamorphosis that had taken place since the morning. The whole building was darkened; a large purple veil hung behind the altar, and concealed the gigantic marble figures of the baptism of our Lord by St. John Baptist. The six immense yellow wax-candles were being slowly lighted, and the triangular candlestick with its fifteen lights stood in the centre before the altar.

The nave was rapidly filling; many strangers were there (evidently English, by their irreverent behaviour, and almost loud talking), and the ladies, not liking their vicinity, sheltered themselves as much as possible among the Maltese, who were ranged in front. It is not necessary to enter into the details of a thing so often described. Those who have heard the Lamentation of Jeremiah sung in the Sixtine or St. Peter's could scarcely enter into the deep delight and emotion with which Clara followed the beautiful boy's voice that told of the desolation of Jerusalem. Her mind wandered back to her own desolate home, her own England; and the pathetic strain that closed this part of the office, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, turn again unto the Lord thy God,' seemed to her the yearning cry of the mother over her lost child, and her inmost heart re-echoed the beautiful words.

Then came her favourite office, Lauds; and though subdued, it was yet glad, for it finished with the 'Laudate Dominum de cælis,' and the sweet chanting of the 'Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel.' And now one by one the wax-lights had been all extinguished, and Clara looked up at the darkened roof, and almost trembled with intense expectation as the last verse of the Gloria Patri died away, the white candle disappeared behind the altar, and the beautiful versicle,— 'Christ was made obedient for us unto death,' was slowly chanted forth amid the solemn and mysterious gloom of the darkened building. There was a moment of silence, and then the full choir began the first verse of the 'Miserere,' as each Catholic knelt to join in its accents of penitence and prayer. It was deeply affecting, and Clara forgot every thing around in the tears that flowed over the forgiven past, the happy present, the blessed future; and she felt that penitence as well as confession, in the Catholic Church, had indeed lost their sting.

She was rudely awakened by the noise around and looking up saw the white candle issuing from behind the altar. It was the token of the Resurrection; it too spoke of peace to come; and slowly rising, she left the church with Catherine. It was scarcely light the next morning when again they sought the sanctuary of God. This time it was to seek Him Himself in His hidden glory. Clara was scarcely less struck than the night before on entering the little Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to which they repaired as the nearest at hand, in order to be ready afterwards for the grand function at St. John's, which was to begin very early. The church was quite dark, except that on the altar dimly burned two wax-candles, and the form of a priest was to be seen before it in the act of taking the pix forth from the Tabernacle. A range of black figures round the rails showed that communion was being administered; while on the steps of the altar knelt a few dark-brown figures and tonsured heads. On these three days only one Mass could be said in each church; and some of the Carmelite monks of the convent were communicating at the same time with the laity.—Silently they knelt them down, in the darkness and stillness of the church, to prepare for the

Guest they expected within so short a time to take up His habitation within them; and Clara, who knew she must fast for the next two days, till Easter morning had fully dawned (as she had not strength to wait for the end of the High Mass on Holy Saturday, which they were going to attend, as the first Mass of the resurrection, at St. John's), felt as though she was taking her last look of the Lord, whose daily visit was to her life, her happiness, her strength, and food, from whence she drew streams, rich with graces and blessings, to satisfy her ardent soul, verily 'a thirst for God.'

"O Catherine, how shall I wait till Easter morning comes?" said she, as they left the church; "how shall I bear the hours on Good Friday, when He is no longer with us for one whole day, and the Church is left desolate and bereft of her Spouse, her light, her joy, her rich jewel? Who will care to be in Church then, when the Lord of Glory is gone?"

Catherine's eyes filled with tears; there was something very beautiful in the fresh, glowing faith and realization of mysteries that every moment showed itself in Clara's innocent manner of expressing herself. It struck every one that came near her, and more especially Catherine, who saw how day by day the fair flower was rapidly coming to maturity, and expanding into greater sweetness and bloom. Day by day she saw those little defects in her character, which she had so mourned and vexed herself about as a Puseyite, one by one disappearing, and fresh graces implanted. Indeed so rapid was the progress, and so marked its origin, that Catherine sighed as she looked upon what she thought her own want of correspondence with God's graces. She could not help the idea sometimes crossing her mind, as she heard her constant slight cough, and saw the beautiful hectic color in her cheek, and the unnatural but sweet brilliancy in her soft dark eyes, that rendered her more lovely than ever, that her beloved charge was rapidly ripening for another world; that God had only brought this fair flower into the garden of His Church to transplant it ere long into Paradise, to bloom in His presence for ever, with an everlasting and never-fading bloom.

"How I love this silent preparation for Communion," continued she, as they slowly walked up Strada Venova, Clara pensively leaning on Catherine's arm; "each one in the stillness of his own heart preparing the abode of His God.—How different from Anglican devotion, that 'hopelessly following a long form of words,' as some one expresses it. But see, there is Mr. Courtney coming down the street to meet us."

"I saw you coming," said he, when he came up, with the sweet smile and slightly heightened color he always wore as he came from his morning visit to church; "and I came to tell you to be sure and see the procession, which is to take place this evening and to-morrow too I believe, particularly if the wind rises as it is now doing."

"How will the wind hinder the procession?" asked Clara.

"By blowing out the candles," returned young Courtney playfully. "You will see such an exhibition of them to-night."

"Where will it pass?" inquired Catherine.

"It comes out of Santa Maria di Gesu," he replied; "then goes up Strada S. Orsola, down Strada Mercante, and so home again. You really must see it; for this is what the Protestants call Paganism, you know."

"If the night is very fine and warm," replied Catherine, "I think Clara may venture, if she is not too tired. You will let us know if it takes place to-night or to-morrow night."

"I shall be quite sure to know all about it," he replied. "And now I will not detain you, for you must be in good time at St. John's to secure your seats in the gallery."

And now we will not detain our readers with an oft-told tale of ceremonies, which must be familiar, at least in description, to all. Young Courtney proved an excellent cicerone on this occasion to his friends, and to Mr. Merville, who only ran away when forced by conscience to attend the Protestant prayers that were being read at St. Paul's; for the blessing of the holy oils was equally new to all of them. Strange did it seem even to Clara, the veneration with which they were treated, as she saw Bishop and priests one by one severally make three genuflexions on approaching, saying each time, 'Ave, sanctum oleum,' or, 'Ave, sanctum chrisma;' and beautiful indeed seemed to her the long procession that bore the Lord of Hosts down the great nave of St. John's, under His gorgeous canopy, into the Chapel of the Crucifix, where the retreat for the priests had been carried on, and where now the sepulchre was prepared. When the washing of the feet was over, they descended to make their way through the crowd into the sepulchre. It was perfectly dark, for the light of day could only make its way in thro' the open door; the ground was strewn with bay-leaves, the walls hung with

red drapery, and the whole back part of the altar one blaze of lighted tapers; while in the centre, surrounded by crowns of the choicest and most beautiful flowers, was concealed the object of adoration, known only by the eye of faith.—A large vase of choicest perfume was standing in front; and at the moment they entered, a young priest in his cotta was occupied in making clouds of fragrant odours pour forth from their rich receptacle. It was like a scene of enchantment; and as Clara knelt before the altar-rails, and gazed with a heart on fire with the love of Him who was thus surrounded with all that art could procure to honor His presence, and was so soon, as it were, to withdraw Himself for a little while from amongst them, she felt as if that night was indeed not a night for sleep, but for watching with Him. How could she sleep when He had been through that livelong night, buffeted and spit upon, and dragged from tribunal to tribunal, till the dawn of day had seen Him hurried to the place of His condemnation, the judgment seat of Pilate? But there was another duty to be first performed; and alone and on foot they sat forth on their pilgrimage to the seven churches they had chosen, in order to gain the plenary indulgence for that day. Crowds were making their way in the same direction; confraternities singing hymns as they went; ladies in black; Maltese in their modest faldettes; men, women, and children,—all seemed to have but one object. The retreats had proceeded this holy week, sins had been confessed and absolved, resolutions of amendment made, and, with a glad heart, every soul was at liberty to follow and to weep over the sufferings of their Lord.

CHAPTER XXIX.—THE LAST THREE DAYS.

"Fill high the bowl, and epic it well, and pour The dew oblivious; for the Cross is sharp, The Cross is sharp, and He Is tenderer than a lamb."

Keble.

There was one church that Clara lingered long in that day. She had never lingered there before; but thoughts crowded one after another on her mind as she knelt there, roused by the recollections attached to its name. It was St. Augustine's, the church of the Augustinian Fathers; and my readers will easily imagine it was the thought of his holy mother St. Monica that awakened Clara's slumbering devotion toward this great Father of the Western Church. And now the time for the Tenebræ had again come round; and shall we tell how even the Lamentations of Jeremiah could not still Clara's yearning heart; and how she placed her chair, with a whisper of entreaty, on its face by Catherine's side, and stole away into the sepulchre, where now the distant and plaintive sounds of the far-off lament added to the beauty of the whole scene? Such hours of prayer as there stole on unperceived are things not to be described; but that they were sweet beyond description those who stole a glance at the motionless form and uplifted countenance of the young girl could easily tell, as, with one arm resting on the rails in front of her, she seemed to draw as near as she could be permitted to Him Who "draweth all hearts unto Himself," and to whom she seemed indeed to have said in the depth of her heart, "Draw me, and I will run after Thee." At last, as the 'Miserere' was about to commence, she again rejoined Catherine in time to be a witness of the disgraceful conduct of the English, among whom they were unhappily placed. Several young men were seated near, talking and laughing aloud, as if they were in a theatre, of everything that entered their heads, and one of them had possession of her book and the chair Clara had left turned on its face some time before. Had it not been for Mr. Courtney, who happened to look round at the moment and saw Clara kneeling without any support, while the young men continued their flippant remarks on the little prayer-book they had taken possession of, their impudence would have been unchecked. He instantly rose, restored the book to its owner, and quietly told the gentleman that that chair belonged to a lady; and then returned to his place by Mr. Merville, his flushed cheek only betraying how hurt he was by the irreverence of his country-people. No one however could help bearing the parting remark with which they finished their visit of mockery and insult to the sanctuary of God, as the usual noise concluded the Office.

"Just like the Opera!" exclaimed one aloud, as they rose, and, kicking their chairs aside, left the church, talking audibly to one another.

Good Friday came—the real fast-day of Lent for Clara—and in the broken and disjointed Mass she realized more than ever the desolation that was to ensue. They could not descend into the nave to kiss the feet of the crucifix on account of the crowd; but the realization of the Passion was more acute than ever Clara expected, as two and two the clergy came forward in procession, and lowly bent over the image of their suffering Redeemer; and then the laity pressed forward in their turn, while the choir sang on the