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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 XLIV.

MADAME'S STORY.

Monsieur DuBoulay and Madame had now frequent altercations, and so strongly were they conducted on the part of the old woman that she criminated him with a vehemence which often made him tremble. As a rule, and for his own comfort, he humoured the whims of Madame; but there were times when his own irritability made him peevish, and on such occasions the constant friction of her asperity produced an explosion. Bitter was the language they both employed, and the end of the quarrel was generally to leave Madame in possession of the field.

A few days before the return of Lisette, and after the treatment of their prisoner by Henri, Monsieur had been more than usually irritating. The annoyance he had received from his nephew had made him petulant; neither did his temper become more amiable from the intelligence brought to him by an over-zealous friend that the coterie had at length decided that if he did not raise the means of living directly from the evil one himself, that it was by some means he dreaded should be discovered, and this was why he confined himself so closely to the chateau. This communication aroused him, and he who gloried in keeping the affairs of his home a secret from his friends, now began to be apprehensive lest their curiosity being excited they should employ some practical plan for finding out the mystery. Monsieur endeavoured to conceal these feelings of alarm from his friends, but when alone he felt positively frightened on the subject.

An irritable man must have something to quarrel with, if it be only a stone wall. Still, it is more gratifying to the morbid feeling which rules him if the object on which he vents his indignation be living, as in such cases its shrinking sensitiveness proves that the labour of quarrelling is not altogether thrown away. Monsieur had nothing living in the house that he could quarrel with, except it was Madame and Anthony. To practice his anger on the latter he knew would be useless, and, therefore, he chose the former as the object of attack.

Having settled who was to endure his tormenting powers, everything that she did was wrong. Her doings, her speech, and even her very looks were disapproved of. Monsieur was vexing in his manner, so vexing that at length the endurance of Madame became taxed beyond the power of restraint, and she resented his conduct by such an outburst of crimination as he had never before listened to. This destroyed the superficial friendship existing between them—a friendship arising from the conviction on the part of the woman that she was powerless in his grasp, and that, for her own safety, she must feign a submission she never felt. When Lisette returned, this quarrel had just taken place, and she found them to be so distant in their manner toward each other as not to be on speaking terms.

Monsieur would have forced her to do his bidding, but caution forbade the use of severe measures. It was, therefore, a relief to them both to see Lisette return, for the Frenchman would be now no longer compelled to dumbness or soliloquy, seeing that she would be ever present to listen to whatever discourse he might choose to indulge in. Madame was also glad that she had some one to speak with.

To counteract the rumour the coterie had started on his affairs, Monsieur found it to be necessary for maintaining his reputation among his friends that he should appear oftener in Calais. This he scarcely dared to do while Lisette was absent, as there would be only Madame and Anthony to guard the chateau. As soon, therefore, as his domestic returned, he resolved to stop further surmises and to startle his friends by appearing suddenly in their midst.

Being fixed in his determination to visit Calais, Monsieur left the chateau early, with the assurance that he should return precisely by ten o'clock. This resolve on the part of the Frenchman to go, greatly delighted the old woman; it was what she had long desired, and no sooner did he reach the road than she became exceedingly affable toward Lisette. She had long indulged the suspicion that, if ever the time came that he could do without her, in a fit of irritation he would dismiss her from life after his own fashion. This feeling had increased since the last outburst of irritability, and, being a woman of considerable attainments and refined feeling, she felt that to die unknown would be something awful.

A desire to relate her history to some one had long dwelt in the mind of Madame, and the wish to gratify a feeling of vengeance against Mon-

sieur increased the desire. It was nothing to her that unfolding the secret of her condition might ruin him; indeed, she hoped it would, in revenge for his conduct toward her, although this feeling was concealed. In Lisette she fancied she had found a person whom she might trust with her story, and who, if she afterward repented having told it, she felt would not reveal the secret to the injury of her master. Having, therefore, sat down to spend the evening with Lisette alone, she commenced:

"You are a good girl to be so careful of your mother."

"Thank you, Madame, but my mother is the greatest jewel I have on the earth."

"Girls will do well in life who care for their mother."

"Say you so in truth? Then there is a handsome husband and a large fortune for poor Lisette."

"And is that your idea of happiness?"

"What more would Madame wish for her best friend?"

"A fortune may become a source of sorrow."

"Pardon me, but there are more who have sorrow without a fortune than with one."

Madame looked up as Lisette spoke these words, being somewhat annoyed at the lightness of her behaviour. Heaving a sigh, she enquired:

"Lisette, can you keep a secret?"

"Madame, I am a woman, and you know the fame of our sex for that particular virtue."

"You are a woman; you have a woman's sympathy and a woman's love. I would make a confidant of you."

"Oh! Madame, I fear I was never made to carry burdens."

"What do you mean?"

"Is not to be made a confidant to have to bear another's troubles as well as one's own? I am sure that what with looking out for a husband and fearing I shall not get one, and then wondering, should I get one, how long I should like him, is enough for any poor girl who has but one head to think and one heart to feel."

"Be serious, Lisette, or you will lose my confidence."

"Madame, I should regret it; but must I become as demure as a sister of charity?"

"You have a heart that can feel; I know it from the earnestness you manifested for your mother's welfare, and you have a head that can think."

"Pardon me, Madame, but the thoughts of Lisette are such silly ones—"

"You have a head that can think and a silence that can keep a secret."

"How does Madame know this?" enquired Lisette, fixing her eyes on her.

"I know it from your thoughtful manner and your feeling heart."

"Is that all?" she enquired again, somewhat relieved by the declaration of the basis on which the woman rested her judgment of character.

"It is; now permit me to make a confidant of you."

"I am all attention; but if it is more than the child's heart of Lisette can bear, I pray you not to press it on me."

"You can bear it."

"Proceed."

"Lisette, I am not a Frenchwoman."

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed, lifting up her hands and eyes.

This exclamation somewhat disconcerted Madame, but, recollecting that she had already committed herself, she proceeded:

"Be not surprised I am not a Frenchwoman, but I am a very old woman. I know not my exact age, but it is great. I have lived long past the time allotted for man's life; yet you see I am in health, and am capable of moving about far better than some who are much younger. But my shrivelled form speaks of my length of years, although my brain in some things is clear. Lisette, I was once young and pretty, but never so beautiful as you. Come here, my child, and lay your head in the lap of an old woman, whose heart is almost withered, while she tells you the tale of her sorrowful life."

Being now deeply interested in the history of Madame, she seated herself on a cushion at her feet, and placed her head in her lap. "May the God of Heaven guard you from every evil, my child!" said Madame, as she placed one hand on the beautiful cheek of Lisette, and with the other wiped away the tear which were fast filling her aged eyes.

"Lisette," she continued, "I am an Englishwoman, but I have for years been banished from home and friends, who must by this time be all dead. I once possessed a heart, whose youthful affection claimed the right of exercising itself in the choice of whom it would embrace. More than one suitor sought my hand, whom my judgment approved, but whom my affections re-

fused to recognize. A warm heart will often rebel against the rules of discretion in the exercise of affection. It is possibly wrong, but the theory that it is wrong is not believed in at all times, and it is only years and experience which can make us wiser. Pardon the garrulity of an old woman. In my case there at length appeared a man, a poor officer in a dragoon regiment, whom my heart embraced. He was handsome in person, noble in disposition, the very soul of honour; courageous as a lion in the discharge of duty, but he was poor. At first sight my heart became united to him; he seemed to be my ideal of a man. The soldiers being quartered in our town, the brave dragoon was invited to parties given in honour of his regiment. It was there we met and danced; and it soon appeared to us both that we were no longer free. But the soldier was honour itself; and no sooner did he discover the impression he had made on my mind than he candidly revealed his circumstances. Poverty seems a fiction to those in love; it sometimes appears an illusion it is right to strengthen, to elicit pure affection. It is a mistake, Lisette, for how to live fills the soul with too much anxious care to permit affection to enjoy the absolute control of life.

"My father was a wealthy man, and when Rumour, which walked with rapid strides through our little town, bearing intelligence of my acquaintance with the soldier was heard by him, he enquired of me the truth of the report. I frankly told him all, and so did the man I loved. My father smiled on hearing the limited circumstances of my future husband. With him there was no consideration beyond my happiness, and he gave his consent with the promise of a noble dowry. The day was really fixed for my wedding, when suddenly the conduct of my father changed. My eldest brother disapproved of our engagement, and persuaded him to withdraw his consent.

"When this change in the mind of my father took place, the soldier sought for, and obtained an interview with him. Angry words attended that meeting, and, on leaving my father, it rested with me to decide if I would follow his fortunes, or break off the engagement. He left me free, but although in honour he withdrew the exercise of every influence, I could tell that his heart was still with me, and I made my choice, which I never regretted. Soon after we were married the regiment to which he belonged was ordered on foreign service. I accompanied him to the seat of war, and with my own hands closed his eyes in death on the field of glory. Poor we had lived, and in poverty he left me at his death. When my husband was dead I returned to England, accompanied by two children, not my own, but belonging to a brother officer in the same regiment as my husband, who, being wifeless, commended them to my care, as he died in the hospital of his wounds.

It was a dismal night in the month of December when I dismounted from the coach, having travelled from London. My journey had exhausted all my means, and, hoping that my condition would now move the heart of my father to relent and again to accept me, I waded through the snow from the coach office to my childhood's home. I shall never forget that night. The snow was still falling as I paced the streets, and lay so thick on the ground as almost to obstruct my progress. Yet, urged by necessity, I pushed onward, bearing the little boy in my arms and leading the eldest, a girl, by the hand. As I drew near to the door of my father's house, I could see a cheerful fire burning, candles lighted, and the family seated at their evening meal. At the sight my heart sank within me, and had I not the dear children I should have fallen to the ground. The thought of them moved me to endure, and, with a trembling hand and aching heart, I lifted the knocker, and it fell loudly back in its place. The wind whistled with a piercing blast as I stood awaiting a reply, and chilled my very frame. Again I knocked, and the door being opened by an old servant I enquired for my father.

"In an instant that faithful creature recognized me, and, with a want of ceremony almost amounting to rudeness, she rushed into the parlour and announced my arrival. From some cause, which I could never ascertain, my eldest brother possessed an absolute control of my father, and no sooner did he hear my name mentioned than, rising from his seat, he left the room to meet me. As he came into the hall where I was standing shivering from cold, I could see that his countenance was pale from indignation, and that his lip quivered from very rage. Flashing his eyes on me and curling his lip in scorn, he enquired:

"Madam, your business?"

"On hearing these words my spirit became stirred, and I replied: 'My business here is to see my father, and to request him again to accept me.'

"Your father will not see you," and then, without further speaking, he opened the door, and, having done so, he continued: 'Madam, you have received your reply, and I must request of you to depart.'

"Hearing these words did not make me faint, Lisette; but they fired my spirit to a greater earnestness, and I replied: 'What right have you, sir, thus to address me in my father's house? I have come here to see my father and see him I will.'

"Madam," said he, "it is a painful duty, but I must discharge it; and, placing his hand on me, and forcing me into the street and into the snow, he closed the door. But even this did not destroy my spirit; I entered the house again, and had reached the parlour door before

he stopped me. There I saw my father, and called to him for help. But he was as though he heard me not. Turning to my brother, I again enquired for his authority to treat me thus, but the only answer I received was, 'you have chosen your soldier; go, follow where he leads.'

"In vain I told him he had fallen on the field of battle and left me a widow without means; in vain I accused him of wanting natural affection, and reminded him of our childhood's love. He was a man of marble. Finding there to be no hope for myself, I pleaded for the orphans of a British officer, who had fallen fighting his country's battles. But my appeal was vain, for this time he put me forth into the cold and stormy night and secured the door. As the grating of that lock fell upon my ear it shot a pang to my heart, and the spirit which had hitherto sustained me giving way, I sank exhausted on the snow. How long I lay in that condition I cannot tell, but I was aroused by a kind hand lifting me up and trying to force a stimulant down my throat. My benefactress was the old servant. Bidding defiance to any consequences which might ensue, she had left the house by a back door, and coming in search of me found me where I lay. My first concern when consciousness was restored was for the children. They were still with me—one holding on to my hand, the other nestling in my bosom.

"Don't weep, Lisette," the narrative had affected the girl to tears.

"On recovering my senses, the old servant led me to a friend of hers in humble circumstances, where all that humanity could perform, with such means as they had at command, was readily employed for my welfare. My health did not greatly suffer from this incident, but my spirit was for a time broken. But the sight of the children aroused me, and I sought to find out their relatives. In this I naturally failed, for, having lost the names of them as written, and in my sorrow and journey forgetting, there was little to be done. Yet I advertised for them in the name of their father and his regiment, but, receiving no response, I adopted them as my own. Having these orphans on my hands to provide for roused me to energy.

"I never saw my father again; he quickly died, and one after the other of my family soon followed. About three years after my return the weather became exceedingly cold in the month of August. There was snow in harvest, and my eldest brother being caught in the storm became wet to the skin. A cold quickly seized him; inflammation followed, and in a short time he, too, was numbered with the dead. On the death of my eldest brother I became the inheritor of my father's property. One old Sir Harry Chillington was executor to my father's will, and before I could claim the estate, he said, it was necessary that I should accompany him to the Netherlands to prove my husband's death. Unsuspectingly, and happy in the thought of being able to provide for the children, I accompanied him. But the whole matter was a plot; I was deceived, and have never since seen the English shore. Monsieur once told me that the family of Sir Harry knew nothing of his doings; that he said I had died suddenly in France and had made a will leaving my property to him. To keep me here he invested a sum of money to be paid to the person having charge of me as long as I live, and on my death to revert to the crown. I lived many years with a person in the neighbourhood of Arras, and was then removed to the chateau, where, I suppose, I shall die and be forgotten. It is many years since all this happened, and the children I left behind, should they be living, would now be old. Yet I still live—and Sir Harry Chillington has gone to judgment."

"But another Sir Harry still lives," said Lisette, in English.

"Good Heavens! what do I hear?" exclaimed Madame, starting from her seat on hearing Lisette speak her native language. The frightened manner of the woman amused her, and she replied:

"Madame, don't be frightened; I shall not bite you."

"Do you speak English? and do I again hear that language spoken by a woman's tongue?"

"Madame, when you placed your history in my possession you knew not what use I should make of it. You had confidence in me; and may I now venture to trust you in the same manner?"

"Lisette, I have relieved my mind of a burden I have for years carried. I did have confidence in you that you would not betray my secret, and I now offer to you the same privilege."

Lisette paced the room as the woman was speaking, as though hesitating to proceed further. This was seen by her, and she continued: "My child, forbear to trust me unless you can fully rely on me, and I vow to Heaven that what I already know shall never pass my lips. I am old, too old to be trusted with the secrets of youth, but my heart is faithful."

"Madame, I doubt not your faithfulness, but I question the policy of such an act."

"I will leave it with you."

"You would like to return to England, Madame?"

"Ask me, Lisette, if I would like the greatest joy earth could afford me? In once more seeing the shores of England I could die happy."

"Shall I make it a stipulation that if you keep my secret you shall return?"

"I will not accept it. Age has rendered me decrepit, but my brain is still vigorous, and I can perceive that such an act would be to sell