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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

CHAPTER XIX.—Continued.

It would be difficult to tell the feelings that beset her as she wandered round the Lodge, and looked out of the gate towards the distant towers of St. Wilfrid's. She was indeed alone; her heart enclosed sorrows which no one near her could even understand. But her very loneliness made her feel that her sole support was in God; and as she mused on that evening at the shrubbery-gate, she laid out a plan of daily life for herself; for she felt that without occupation her health would fall a prey to her conflicting feelings.

Mrs. Selwyn breakfasted at nine; and the Wednesday and Friday Prayers were at eleven. The morning Clara devoted regularly to Mr. Wingfield's task; and, strange to say, a History of England had met her eye on entering the Lodge, stranger still, she had never heard of it before. It was Lingard; and eager to gain more information about many things that puzzled her mind, she determined to read this attentively. Then there were her window to direct odd times, Mildred's old piano, her embroidery, and sundry solitary walks which she purposed taking, in search of a small town a few miles off where they said daily prayers, and weekly Communions had been lately established. Even if she could not be trusted with parochial work, with her Breviary as her companion, she felt that she might be happy if she determined to do all God's Will for her, be it what it might. And so the time passed on; every Wednesday and Friday she took her solitary walk to church; and on Sundays accompanied Mrs. Selwyn in her carriage thither, to hear the prayers read by Mr. Middleton, the rector, followed by a dull sermon. And then she would steal out to the wall of the chancel, and linger around the white stone that lay beneath its shadow in its pure simplicity, with its long horizontal cross and its simple inscription; and many a time she scarcely perceived the look of longing interest that Laura Middleton cast towards what was once Clara's home. But Clara knew that she was not a welcome guest there. Mr. and Mrs. Middleton had called on Mrs. Selwyn, and that lady had returned their visit; but there was such a marked coldness in the looks of both, and especially of Mrs. Middleton, that Clara understood, before Mrs. Selwyn informed her, with sundry notes and comments of the fact, that they particularly wished Laura to show her acquaintance. And yet Laura and Clara both knew that a kindred heart was near when they each heard the other's low responses, and saw by chance the bent head, plain dress, and devotional posture. They had lingered for one another, and stood aside for each other to pass many a time when they had both stayed behind the others in St. Wilfrid's, finishing their devotions; and more than once Clara had been touched even to tears by the sight of new-strewn flowers on her father's grave, and she had guessed that no hand but that of the interesting young stranger could have placed them there; but as yet they had not dared to speak.

One bright day about the end of April—it was just the day when the Church celebrates the Patronage of St. Joseph—Clara at last put into practice her long-cherished project of finding her way to Ashford Market, as the little straggling town was called, where she had been told she would find a newly-built church. She wrapped herself up, asked Mrs. Selwyn's leave to go and see her old nurse, Mrs. Wallis, who lived a little way out of Ashford and was unwell, and was soon on her way debating within herself whether she could use the office of St. Joseph just as it stood in the Breviary. At last she came to the conclusion that it was a very foolish thing to leave such a saint as St. Joseph (a saint of the Bible, too) out of the Calendar, and by the time she reached Mr. Wallis's, she had entered more than she ever in her life had done before into the Catholic way of viewing and reverencing the great St. Joseph, that model of virgin souls, to whom God Himself deigned to be subject, and to commit the keeping of His Immaculate Mother.

Her visit over, she pursued her way into Ashford. Just at the outskirts of the town stood a little building surmounted by a cross, into which people were making their way. She looked at her watch; it was not yet three. 'The bell will soon begin to ring,' thought she; and delighted at what she thought the happy accident that had at once brought her upon the church she was seeking, she followed the straggling worshippers, and entered the building. Each one on entering bent the knee; and Clara, delighted to find that she had been kept in countenance, did the same. She scarcely glanced towards the altar, for the chapel seemed rather dark, and Clara's eyes were dazzled by the sunshine without, but instantly made her way to the nearest bench and knelt down. A strange feeling of awe

and delight filled her soul; and when she raised her head, she was able to distinguish all around her. It was a plain building, which could admit of much future decoration; the altar was hung with white; six silver candelabras and other ornaments stood upon it; and before it hung the silver lamp, fed with oil,—the lamp of the Sanctuary! People were passing in and out; and a side-altar, on which stood a beautiful statue of St. Joseph and his Divine Foster-child, was lighted up. Several people were kneeling before it; others were in the benches, absorbed in contemplation before the Tabernacle, or repeating their rosaries; but the gaze was there, from the moment the worshipper, be it whom it may, pushed aside the screen that hid it from his sight. Within that Tabernacle was One Who drew all hearts to Himself; and that was His abiding place on earth. For a moment Clara gazed in doubt; but very soon the consciousness of where she was came upon her. She saw, what she had not remarked on entering, each one reverently making the sign of the Cross as he dipped his fingers in the holy water at the entrance; and then as the pale light of the silver lamp met her gaze and it fell on the curtained Tabernacle, the reality of the Bodily Presence of Him Whom her soul had sought these long years and at last found passed like a flash of living light into her soul.—Like the Sainted Magdalene, she thought she could hear His Voice speak that one living word of tenderest reproach,—'Mary!' It was a never-to-be-forgotten moment. Here at any rate, there was no more doubt. He the Lord of Glory, was Himself there; and Clara hid her face, and tears of unspeakable delight fell silently down her cheeks. Angels' wings seemed fanning the air; the forms of saints hovering by; the veil that conceals the unseen world drawn aside. She was in the presence chamber of the King of kings, and He awaiting the requests of His sorrow-stricken child, just as when, in the days of His flesh, His smile healed the broken-hearted, gave life to the sinner and sight to the blind. A slight stir made her raise her eyes; the crowd had increased; the altar of St. Joseph was deserted; little boys in white cottas were busily lighting the numerous candles on the high altar; something was in preparation. A priest came in; clouds of incense arose; the litanyes were intoned; and the whole congregation with one breath, joined in the sweetly-chaunted 'Ora pro nobis.' It was one mighty living voice; no head was turned, no voice was out of tune; labourer and child, poor and rich, all joined; and then rose the fresh cloud of incense, and every head was bowed. Clara saw the priest approach the Tabernacle, and with clasped hands gazed upon the preparations. The organ swelled its sweet, rich notes, and a chorus began singing her favorite air,—'O Jesu mi, Filia Maria! O Jesu mi!'

So this was Benediction. And when the priest turned, with his face of mingled awe and love, holding in his hand the gemmed glory that surrounded the pure white form under which the Lord of Hosts veils His glory unapproachable,—oh, tell me! did it want Clara's young and sensitive heart to melt into a flood of such tears as Saints have shed when night has been too short to tell the love that burned within, and made them cast aside the covering that burdened their throbbing hearts, and cry, 'Enough, Lord; enough!'

It was long ere she quite realized where she was. The lights were one by one extinguished, the worshippers one by one retired, and only the pale lamp before the altar burned on. But He was still there; it was not like Margaret Chapel—the vacant sepulchre, at best, when service was over. Still, on His humble throne, He was resting, to be adored and loved; and Clara could not tear herself away. At last she recollected that they must be waiting to shut the doors, and stealthily gliding to the holy water, for the first time in her life she openly made the holy sign, and bent the knee, not to the mere altar, but to 'Him who dwells thereon!'

A figure wrapped in a dark cloak, passed quickly down the aisle at the moment. Clara stood aside to let him pass. She had not yet drawn down her veil. He seemed surprised,—glanced at her downcast features, half passed her, and then, turning back, said hesitatingly, 'Miss Leslie?—or am I mistaken?'

Clara looked up. The cloak had fallen open, and her eye fell on the white heart. It was Father Raymond! Her heart beat high. She had not forgotten the impression the young Passionist had left in that one brief interview.—Alan's image came with the suddenness of lightning to her mind's eye,—he was never very far distant,—and it was with an easily-perceived gush of delight that she accepted his kindly-proffered hand. He almost instantly perceived her altered appearance, and inquired the reason of the change; but it scarcely needed her rising color and gushing tears, and the instantly averted look, as she glanced back at the sanctuary to tell her tale. He had already read it in her

pale features, in the care-worn look, and her appearance in that place.

'Ah, Father Raymond, I was happy then.' She suddenly stopped, and turned her eyes again towards the altar, for she could not forget the Presence in that holy place. He saw it, and said, anxiously,

'I have just been summoned to attend a sick person, else I have long wished to give you a message which was intrusted to me some time ago by a brother of yours, I believe.'

He did not need Clara's eloquent look at this moment.

'The sick person lives near Ashton, and in these times of cholera it will not do to waste time, else—'

'I am returning to Ashton,' said Clara; 'I am staying there. Would you allow me to walk that way with you?'

Her anxiety to hear of Alan had made her forget every thing else, and in another minute she found herself walking beside the priest, whom she would have thought her duty to avoid in every way, had she given herself time to think. We will not say she was sorry. She had done it without thinking,—without intending to do it; and she felt her heart flutter like one who is suddenly put in possession of a long-forbidden, long-yearned-after delight.

'Have you heard lately from Alan?' she said anxiously.

'Not quite lately,' replied the priest. 'I think he heard of you, from a Mr. Courtney some time ago.'

'Yes, I remember it distinctly,' replied Clara. 'I begged Mr. Courtney to write.'

Father Raymond took out a letter, and read aloud:

'If you should again meet with my dear Clara, tell her she little knows the pleasure her message has given me. Tell her how often I pray for her, how undiminished is my fond affection for her. She is too open, too Catholic at heart, not ultimately to be led right. Something tells me the time is approaching when we shall meet again, one in faith and love once more. Tell her all this, and far more—tell her there is but one way to unity; all else is a delusion.'

Father Raymond gave one glance towards Clara, looked down the page, and stopped.

Clara could not speak. She was in tears,—tears that could not be restrained; but they were sweet ones.

'Oh, that it might be so,' sighed she. She then suddenly turned to the priest, with a look of deep and solemn earnestness. 'I would ask you a question. Will you answer it me truly—faithfully?'

There was a sad smile on his gentle, placid features as he looked full in her face, and replied,

'I certainly will. Can you trust me. Do you, too, think we lose our English hearts in becoming Catholic priests?'

'Are you really happy?' asked Clara, seeking to read the answer in his speaking countenance. 'Is the Church of Rome all that one fancies she is, when lingering without her walls? Do you never look back with regret upon your Anglican days? 'Oh, she added, with increasing earnestness, 'tell me this truly: my happiness here and hereafter may depend on your answer.'

Father Raymond did not reply for a few moments; and expression of grateful, trusting peace gathered over her features, and a smile so full of heavenly sweetness crossed his open countenance (one of those beautiful mirrors where a shade of deception seemed as if it could not dwell), it would have carried conviction to any, far more to that of Clara's.

'It is now nearly four years,' said he, at last, 'since God gave me the grace to see that there is but one fold, as there is one Shepherd; and if never from that moment, to have doubted for one instant as to the step I then took being God's gracious leading to one so undeserving of His Grace; if to feel day by day, and hour by hour, a deeper conviction that the Church of Rome alone is that One Immaculate Spouse of Christ, ever the same, who only can lead the soul to the full knowledge of God; if to thank God to every instant of my life for His unspeakable mercy,—if all this be happiness, then, my dear Miss Leslie, I am happy.'

'But I am told you all repent the step you have taken,' said Clara deeply struck by his manner; 'I so fear doubting, as a Roman Catholic, after a short time, just in the way I do now.'

'Why should you doubt?' returned Father Raymond, smiling. 'Do I doubt? did you ever see a Catholic doubting? There was a simplicity in his manner of speaking that greatly struck Clara, and she walked on in silence.'

'What is the definition of faith?' continued Father Raymond,—believing without doubting. The moment doubt arises, faith no longer exists; a person who doubts cannot possess faith; we know that without faith there is no salvation.'

Clara walked on; a new idea had struck her

mind, and she pondered over these words in silence.

'So, then, you think no one but a Catholic can possess faith?' replied she, at last.

'Faith is the special gift of God,' replied Father Raymond; 'it is not the mere result of speculation, a well-grounded opinion; it is a supernatural conviction, which is the gift of God alone. I should not think you knew what faith was,' he continued, looking with a smile of the deepest interest and compassion into her upturned, anxious, but now puzzled countenance.

She sighed deeply. 'I never heard that definition of faith,' said she; 'it strikes me as a true one; and if it is so, then indeed I never have possessed faith.'

'You must pray for it, my dear child,' said Father Raymond.

Clara looked gratefully up, and a thrill went through her heart to be thus called by a Catholic priest.

'Pray earnestly, humbly, fervently,' proceeded Father Raymond; 'have great confidence in God; He has pledged Himself that those who truly seek Him shall find Him; it is a moral impossibility for Him not to guide you aright if you ask it of Him. Imitate the example of the wise men; they followed the star that they saw in the East; and the star led them till they came to Jerusalem, and there they asked counsel of God's appointed ministers. It disappeared for a time, but when they followed the advice given by the ministers of God whom they had sought, the star returned and guided them where the young Child lay; and then they doubted no more.'

Clara listened with beating heart; every word went to her heart. She too had seen the star; she too had arisen and followed it, and now it seemed to have disappeared from her path and God's appointed minister was at her side, so providentially, as it were, sent to guide her, and she had long felt that she must search this matter to the bottom. They were nearing the village; she asked whether he was to remain long in this neighborhood. The answer was short. Now that the cholera had reached Ashton, he did not know how long he might be wanted.

'It is a cholera case, then, you are going to visit,' replied Clara earnestly, 'it has, then, reached us at last?'

'Do you fear it?' inquired Father Raymond, kindly.

'I should not have feared it when I saw you last,' replied Clara; 'but now—O Father Raymond, you know the agony of doubt,—the agony of not knowing whether you are within the fold of Christ!'

She covered her face with both hands. They had reached a place where their ways parted.—He stood still.

'Do not fear,' said he, more gentle than ever; 'God cannot but hear your prayers. If I can be of any use to you, I need not tell you that the sister of Alan Leslie has more than common claims on your poor services and prayers.'

'Thank you,' said Clara, with glistening eyes. 'I hope we shall meet again; this evening has shown me that I have already lingered too long.'

'Only let me entreat you once more to pray,' said Father Raymond; 'pray earnestly, fervently, humbly.'

There was a slight stress on the last word, and Clara understood it; then a fervent 'God bless you!' and the young Passionist, wrapping his cloak round him, disappeared in an instant on his errand of mercy.

CHAPTER XX.—LIBERTY REGAINED.

'She never hears a soft wind bear  
Low music on its way,  
But deems it sent from heavenly air,  
For her who cannot stay,  
Let her depart!'

Midnight was long passed on that evening; and still in Clara's room twinkled her lonely lamp while she sat by the table writing and re-writing a letter to Mr. Wingfield. Long she paused, pen in hand; again and again she tore up a half-finished attempt, and again and again she knelt to ask for guidance. At last it was finished; it was a piece of note paper; one side was written, and half the other; and with a resolution to wait for some days before it was posted, Clara lay down to sleep. It was as follows:

'My Very Dear Father,—I know that what I am going to tell you will give you pain; and perhaps you will scarcely believe the intensity of grief that this gives me. I have been gradually coming to the conclusion for some time that I cannot, I dare not, adhere to the promise I gave you last Christmas Eve. I must settle this question for myself; I must hear what Roman Catholics have to say on their side of the question, for at present I seem to be entirely ignorant of it. Most earnestly have I prayed to be guided; and with an earnest wish to have my mind settled, have I carefully perused all the books you gave me before I left London; but they cannot satisfy me. I have tried distracting my mind with the occupations you gave me; but I feel that were I to go on longer putting by these

dreadful doubts that beset my mind as a temptation, I should risk stifling the voice of God. I fully feel my own ignorance and inability to grasp the controversy between the Church of England and the Church of Rome, on the subject of the Pope's supremacy; but, at the same time, I cannot but see that the same argument would oblige a Presbyterian to remain in schism: for the controversy on the subject of Episcopacy and Presbytery is to the full as difficult and intricate to grasp; and this with many others, in days gone by, I decided for myself, though I now see on what slight grounds. One, thought strikes me, as I write, with almost overwhelming intensity. If our guide is not an infallible one, if she can once err, what are we poor ignorant people to do?—How can we ever trust her again? And the Church of England especially disclaims infallibility. She allows herself that she can err?'

'It is past midnight, and my heart is sick, and my hand trembles so that I can write no more.—O my dearest father, pity me, and pray for me. Forgive my waywardness, my foolishness, and all the trouble and grief I have given and am giving you.'

'Your humble, grateful and still loving child,  
'CLARA.'

Seven days she waited, reading this letter day by day, and earnestly praying that if she were wrong God would show her that she was so; but on the feast of her favorite St. Catherine of Siena, the letter was put into the post; and feeling as if a load were taken off her mind, Clara set forth on another visit to her old nurse. She now felt that the chain was off her thoughts, and a kind of gladness she had not experienced for many a long day made her step lightly, almost gladly, along the road, murmuring as she went the morning Lauds, which she had not yet time to say. Her visit over, she had an errand in the town, and casting many a wistful glance towards the chapel as she passed, and longing for courage to ask whether Father Raymond was there, she bent her steps up some narrow streets to a small book-shop, which she knew was kept by a Catholic, and where she hoped to find what she was in search of.

The man looked curiously at his customer, but no wonder; for the low almost trembling tones with which she asked for a Catholic Missal betrayed at once that it was no Catholic that was speaking, and yet her earnest look and reverential handling of the books showed that it was not a Protestant heart that beat within that slight form. She drew into the farthest corner of the shop, and with her back to the entrance was so engrossed with what she was examining, that she did not perceive that some one else had come in. The sound of a voice, however, made her start. She turned hastily round, and, at the same instant, Father Raymond broke off his conversation with the shopman and advanced towards her. It was a bright open smile of unconcealed delight with which she this time greeted him, and in a few minutes he was in full possession of the state of her mind.

'So you have broken your chains?' said he, with a very sweet smile. 'When did you decide upon this step?'

'The letter was posted this morning,' replied Clara.

And we will not attempt to say the deep emotion with which she heard that that morning Mass had been offered for her.

He took up the book she had been examining; and Clara began summoning up courage to ask a question she had been long meditating.

'Are you in a hurry?' said she.

'Not in such a hurry but that I can listen anything you have to say,' he replied.

Clara hesitated and looked round the shop.—The man saw it, and opening a door into a parlour close to where they were standing, said a few words in a low and respectful tone to Father Raymond, and then instantly retired.

'Would you like to come in for a few minutes?' said he.

In another moment Clara found herself seated beside the table, and Father Raymond in front of her, in an instant desisting, by his kind, self-possessed manners, every thought but one that a Catholic priest stood before her,—one to whom everything could be safely confided, and who, trained to the guidance of souls, knew, by experience likewise, all the hopes and fears of 'a transition state.' She felt, too, almost for the first time, the great authority before which her doubts were raising themselves. She seemed to shrink into nothing as the thought came across her mind that Father Raymond's words would not be the voice of one man—his individual opinion—but the living answer of that mighty fabric, that venerable, wonderful system, which might be Christ's one Catholic Church.

Father Raymond leaned forward. No one could listen to that voice, or see that kind smile, and feel any more timidity.

'Was there anything which it appears to you I could explain?' said he.

And then he waited patiently for her answer.