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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 X.

AN INCIDENT.

Human life is made up of a collection of incidents, standing out distinctly against departed years. The history of mankind is but a superstructure of events, built up of circumstances, more or less imposing. Taken singly, the events of life frequently appear purposeless; but when united, there is seen to be a plan and Providence in them all. The smallest incident is often the link uniting the greatest events.

It was the month of August. The golden glories of the setting sun lingered in the heavens and threw their rich tints in twilight over the surrounding landscape. On that evening, both Clara Chillington and Charles Freeman might have been seen walking the public path along the cliff, leading from Dover to Folkstone. Both of them were advancing from opposite directions, yet neither knew that the other was on the road. The beautiful weather had drawn forth Clara from the Priory to bewail in solitude her lonely condition; and Charles Freeman had come forth from a scientific study, that he might the more readily in the open air solve the problem perplexing him.

The loneliness of Clara at the Priory was becoming insupportable, threatening to fix itself on her as a disease, for which no alleviation could be found, save in what fed the malady—the melancholy pleasure derived from thinking over the evil. The two had never met since the lost pencil-case was restored, nor had any communication passed between them; yet in the minds of both the image of the other was distinctly retained.

Within the mind of Clara the image of the stranger lingered, forming a pleasing subject for reverie, and occasionally cheering for an instant the dreary hours of her existence. There was nothing defined nor practical in the thoughts she entertained of him, and the feeling arising from her thinking was only such as is produced by lingering over the vision appearing in a pleasant dream. Clara was a simple child of nature, and had no distinct idea that in the esteem of the world she ought to consider her wealth and position as the all-powerful agent to which she must submit, that she might appear eligible for marriage with one of the class who would look down in lofty scorn upon such as Charles Freeman. Shut up within the Priory, and lingering over the phantom produced by the magic of memory, she only thought of herself as being unworthy to enjoy the acquaintance of such a person. She felt toward him as one whom, in secret, she might adore, but with whom she had no thought of associating. Not for a moment did she ever suspect that, even to recognize one of such humble origin as a friend, would, in her position, be esteemed by society such a condescension as to expose her to the tongue of scandal.

With Charles Freeman the image of Clara was frequently present, but only to be pushed aside by more tangible and practical considerations. To him she was as a beautiful form he had once seen, the recollection of which afforded him pleasure. He knew too much of the world ever to suppose for a moment that one in her position could bestow a thought on such a person as himself. Had such a possibility been so much as hinted at in his presence, he would have considered it an unwarrantable presumption, calling for the contempt of silence. Did he think of marrying, he would seek nothing more than a woman who could confide in him and make him her guide and protector. Of late the thought of Clara had become almost banished from his mind, and he had no wish that it should return.

Yet on this evening they were again to meet; they were approaching without knowing it. Clara pursued her walk, drinking in the gentle murmur of the waves as they kissed the shore, and their sound fell on her ear in the low cadence of the unruffled deep. Charles Freeman was absorbed in his scientific solution, and walking, or resting, as his thought became more intensified or relaxed.

While thus moving slowly along the cliff, dreaming in the twilight, the attention of Clara became suddenly arrested by the sight of a dove, which, as a messenger, had winged its way across the channel, bearing, secured beneath its pinions, a note of diminutive size. Wearied with its long flight, on reaching the land the little creature sought to rest on a jutting crag projecting from the level face of the cliff, but, in attempting it, it fell from sheer exhaustion. Anxious to know whether the tired little messenger had fallen to the bottom of the precipice, she had reached a point of observation, when Charles Freeman drew nigh.

The sympathies of Clara for the wearied bird had led her unconsciously to place herself in

proximity to a danger so serious as to threaten her with death. Ignorant of what she was doing, in her eagerness to see what had become of the tired creature, she had placed herself on a portion of the cliff which, while it presented the appearance of firmness, was so undermined as to render it even dangerous for a child to tread upon.

The peril to which Clara was exposed was immediately recognized by Charles Freeman, not only from the place being known to him, but also from the fact that, approaching as he was doing, the condition of the platform on which she was standing distinctly appeared.

The sight aroused him, and invited the emotion he had felt on first seeing her to return upon him with increased energy. For the instant it appeared as though that beautiful vision had re-visited him for the purpose of reproducing the tormenting feelings he had battled with and overcome, and then possibly to dissolve and plunge him again in confusion. It seemed impossible that it could be herself, and in such a situation. But he possessed little of romance; his studies had given a practicalness to his character, and he saw that a moment's delay might be attended with fatal results. Yet how could he give her warning of what she was exposed to, without the alarm being followed by a dangerous result? While taxing his ingenuity, a thrill of horror ran through his vigorous frame, and then, becoming oblivious of every other consideration than the safety of herself, he advanced to where she was standing, and, lifting his hat, as though nothing extraordinary was the matter, begged the favour of addressing her.

This request, and at such a time, however strange it might have appeared to others in a similar station in life, had nothing strange in it to her. Etiquette with Clara had not so absorbed and withered her common nature as to distort every little act of distant familiarity into an impropriety. She often permitted herself to be addressed by such as others would have looked down on in contempt. Being therefore spoken to, and seeing who made the request, she, too, felt that her imagination was playing with her. That it could be the ideal which, in the secret of her heart, she had silently worshipped, appeared for the instant beyond all credence. Yet there he stood; and, permitting herself to be prompted by that kindness which formed an important trait in her character, she approached to listen to him, and thus withdrew herself from danger.

"Pardon me," said Charles Freeman, "but you seem not to be aware of the danger you have so narrowly escaped."

"Danger, sir?" replied Clara; "may I ask your meaning?"

"If you will be good enough to advance a few paces you can see for yourself!"

The sight of the danger to which she had thoughtlessly exposed herself, and from which she was delivered in a manner so strange, caused the cheek of Clara to pale, and a feeling of horror seized her in such force, that it became a sheer act of humanity to conduct her to rest on an adjoining embankment. Having seated her there, Charles Freeman withdrew a few paces, and then stood looking at her in manly compassion. The emotion under which Clara laboured was transient, and in a few minutes she had conquered her excited feelings.

Having recovered herself sufficiently to enter into conversation, Clara poured out her thankfulness to her deliverer, and related to him the cause that had led her into such a position. As the sound of her voice fell on the ear of Charles Freeman, it seemed to him as though it were sweet music proceeding from more than an earthly being, and while he listened he became enraptured. The pleasure filling his soul as he heard the story of the wearied dove from her lips was distinctly visible. His countenance was radiant with delight, and when she had finished the narrative, which showed so plainly the kindness of her heart, it was plain that the happiness enjoyed by the hearer was reciprocated by the narrator.

As Clara proceeded with the details of the incident which had arrested her attention, she fixed her eyes on her only auditor, and saw in him one on whom she believed she could lean in passing through life, one whom she could love as a brother. The vision that, since they had met in the presence of the old sailor, had formed for her a pleasing reverie, had now become changed into a reality, and she was actually speaking with him she loved without knowing it. The nature of Charles Freeman was such as invited confidence to repose in him; his was a nature formed to sustain the weak, and was such as by an irresistible attraction drew the tendrils of an ardent affection to entwine themselves around him.

Having heard the story of the wearied dove,

and, finding its resting-place, by a side path cut on the face of the cliff, he descended, and quickly returned, bearing in his hand the little stranger. Although faint from exhaustion, the bird was still living, and when it had recovered from its fatigue was again likely to become vigorous. Placing the bird in the hand of Clara, as she smoothed its plumage, delicately white, it nestled on her bosom, as though confident of security.

While watching the recovery of the bird, the two thus strangely brought together walked toward the Priory, so deeply engaged in conversation as to be heedless of the distance they had come. For Clara to have a companion, educated, intelligent, and refined, with whom she could converse, was breaking the monotony of her existence, and introducing her to a new world. The disparity in their social position did not enter her mind; she believed that in him she had found a friend, and her loving heart entwined itself around him. Under this feeling, her simplicity of the doings of the world became a fountain whence gushed forth affection, pure and free, and, being a stranger to dissimulation, she loved with the frankness of childhood.

The dove having now regained its strength, after the misadventure it was the bearer, which had become loosened by its misfortune, was again secured, the little creature spread its wings and flew on its homeward flight. Together they watched the course of that bird, until the shadows of evening, now fast hiding the surrounding landscape, shut it out from view. That link in the chain of incidents, which had brought them into an acquaintance, being removed, and, approaching near to the Priory, they separated with a mutual regret, the secret of which they both concealed.

That evening Clara returned home with the dawn of a new existence opening upon her. A state she had longed for with an intense earnestness, and in the absence of which she had wept bitter tears, was now before her. She felt that she was about to possess a friend, a brother, of whom she might make a confidant.

Charles Freeman also returned homeward, but his thoughts were not so happy. With a greater knowledge of the world, as he retraced his steps, he blamed himself for permitting his affection to over-rule his reason. He felt it to be impossible that a correspondence could be carried on between himself and the heiress of the Priory, and he upbraided himself with a vehemence he did not often practice.

From the incident of that evening, the former tranquility in the life of Clara Chillington and Charles Freeman became seriously disturbed, and a new state of being, more boisterous and difficult than either of them could have thought of opened before them.

Is it not a strange law of nature, that when two souls become bound together in the ties of mutual affection, they bid defiance to all the sorrows and difficulties of life to separate them? The attrition of events frequently severs the closest friendship; but these do but more securely fasten the sacred enclosure surrounding the temple of Love.

From that night, the meeting of these two friends was of frequent occurrence.

CHAPTER XI.

THE INTIMATION.

The fire was burning brightly in the parlour of that old-fashioned inn, wearing the sign of the "Folkstone Arms." The year was drawing to a close; it was within a few days of Christmas, and signs of that approaching festival appeared on every hand, when gathered in that parlour, and encircling a steaming punch-bowl, were some of the best men of that day. That was a fast age, and differed widely from the demureness succeeding it. It was an age vivid in gay clothing; and the blue coats, trimmed with gilt buttons which flashed in the light of wax candles and yellow waistcoats, and gay neckerchiefs, and top boots, gave to the company there assembled a brilliant and variegated aspect.

The spectacle of that day with these men had been a cock fight; the betting had run high, and it had fallen to the lot of Sir Harry Chillington to be the winner of a considerable amount of money. The baronet was elated with his successes, and it being a standing rule with the clique that the winner should frequently replenish the punch-bowl, that he might not part with more than he was compelled to, Sir Harry was forcing himself to drink deeply.

The party was a thoroughly convivial one, and under the influence of the potations they so freely imbibed, the peculiar organization of their moral temperament developed itself. In one corner of the room were the political men, who imagining themselves to be discussing the doings of the Premier, were hammering their fists on the table with the very natural result of breaking glasses and tobacco pipes. Glancing at each other from bloodshot eyes that overlooked cheeks purple from drinking punch, they attempted to say much, but said very little, and for the simple reason that the idea drink had inspired them to conceive was from the same cause driven from their muddled brain before it could be placed into words. This led to a great deal of effort to speak, an unceasing nodding of heads, and but very little plain articulation. As a very natural consequence of this condition sentiments were left but half expressed and such as escaped outire from their lips

were of the most confused character. The scenes produced from amidst this mental confusion were most grotesque. The Premier of England and the King of France were doing the same thing at the same time, and had both been summoned to Windsor Castle. Queen Charlotte had just been guillotined; King George had danced with Marie Antoinette until she had fainted and was placed under a pump as a restorative, and the government were about to introduce a measure to tax the salt eaten by the man in the moon. Yet these politicians would talk, and did talk, until not even a monosyllable could be uttered, and their chins dropping on their chests told plainly that they were gone.

At another table sat a party engaged in an attempt to play a game of cribbage, while under the influence of drink enning planted itself upon their arched brows, and the hope of being able to cheat, or to outwit each other glanced from their twinkling eyeballs. Surrounding the fire sat the uproarious party, singing songs as gentlemen, of such a character as would not now be tolerated in public company in the village pot-house, or in the slums of large cities. Sir Harry Chillington being excited had become furiously speculative, and was willing to lay a wager with anybody, and to any amount, on any matter.

"I'll bet any gentleman fifty guineas that I will produce a man who will eat a couple of ducks with eeteras in half an hour."

"It is a wager!" shouted the man who had been a heavy loser by the winnings of the baronet, and who either in the hope of retrieving his losses, or avenging himself, was willing to enter the lists again.

"Gentlemen," said Sir Harry, addressing the fuddled crew, "you are witnesses this is a fair wager."

"All right!" was exclaimed by such whose intellect was sufficiently clear to admit the idea of what was going on in the room.

Touching the bell the summons was obeyed by the landlord in person.

"Digby," said the baronet, "have you a couple of ducks in the larder?"

"I have two very fine ones; they are as good a couple of ducks as ever was seen in the market, let the rest come from where they may. I hatched 'em myself, gentlemen; they had the run of the stable and pig sty all the summer, and then I shut 'em up and fattened 'em for Christmas."

"Don't stand prating," replied Sir Harry, angrily, "get them done quickly. How long before they will be ready?"

"I'll ask," said the landlord, only too glad to get away from the furious man.

On receiving an answer as to the time it would take to prepare the birds for table, the baronet, having drunk another glass of punch, staggered to the door and forth into the street. The wind was blowing cold and bleak as he groped his way through the unlighted streets, whose darkness was only broken by the flickering light from the lantern of some belated matron, or spinster, who had been out to tea, and was returning home. But every nook and corner of that angular town was to him well known; he often visited every part of it in the darkness, and for purposes too of which daylight might be ashamed. It was therefore an easy matter with him to find that portion of it bearing the French name of the *Fleur de Lis*; and it was while travelling in that direction, and opposite to the only confectioner's shop the town could then boast of, that a wild hullabaloo burst upon his ear with startling effect.

"It is the press gang," said Sir Harry to himself, as he heard the noise; "they have caught some poor wretch, and regardless of his cries are forcing him on board of a man-of-war to serve his country against his inclination." But the shouting was advancing; and as he heard another shriek, the hat of the baronet was knocked from his head. The fearful cry aroused the inhabitants of the street, and lighted candles revealed, not the press gang, but the person of a lame Irish tailor, drunken in his habits, who had met with a misfortune.

The fact was this. Having his residence in a cottage near to the place whither Sir Harry was going, this poor tailor, for once in a long stretch of drunkenness, had summoned sufficient courage to keep himself sober long enough to earn a small joint of meat for his starving family, and this he was determined they should feast off that evening. That the joint might be prepared to meet the wishes of the man, it was suspended before the fire in an open grate, being secured by means of a piece of worsted attached to a nail driven over the mantelpiece of the cottage fireplace. Cheerfully the fire burnt in the small grate, and the slender stick cracked and hissed, as it revolved, as though pleased to be cooked for the benefit of that miserable family. During the progress the lame tailor sat working in a room above that where the meat was roasting; and as the grateful odor from the revolving joint ascended the stairs he sniffed largely, being careful that even the steam should not be lost. In this way things were proceeding quietly, and the tailor's wife and children being distributed in different parts of the house, the joint was left to turn its lonely round to the tune of the singing tea kettle.

Ill-fated joint! How misery sometimes mocks the wretched! The grateful odor from that steaming meat could not be kept within the limits of the tailor's cottage, and borne on the heated and lighted air it rushed out at the door which had been left a little open to prevent the chimney smoking at the wrong end.