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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

CHAPTER XXV.—Continued.

Clara's mind was too much exhausted for a single effort; she merely leaned her head forward, and silently suffered the agonizing sensations of those moments. She was consciously nothing; death, judgment, heaven, hell, all seemed alike to her wearied mind. At times an almost reckless feeling possessed her; all she could do was to listen to that incessant whisper, which fascinated her with its very agony. Listen she must; resist it or argue with it she could not. Time passed on unperceived, and again Father Raymond's gentle touch aroused her. She looked up. They had all left the church, and he was standing alone beside her, in the pale light of the sanctuary lamp. She guessed he had come to bid her sign the act of renunciation, and a shudder again went through her frame. She rose and followed him, however, immediately without a word. Two or three people were in the sacristy. She approached the table; there lay the paper. It was short, merely renouncing the errors of the 'sect' (Father Raymond read over the formula in a low voice to her, and that word went like a dagger to her heart: 'Mr. Wingfield had said right, by her own private judgment she was unchurching the Church of England') in which she had been born and brought up, and promising to take for the future the Holy Roman Church as the guide and arbiter in all matters of faith. She took the pen; her hand did not tremble; slowly and carefully she traced each letter, as if signing her own death-warrant; and when she looked round for the first time, and saw the subdued but deep and heartfelt joy that beamed on the features of each of the assembled group, she felt as if they were imitating the fallen angels of darkness in rejoicing over her fall. She turned away sick at heart, unable to utter a word, and leaned against the wall for support. Catherine was the one witness, as she had acted as her godmother; and when the second came forward, Clara saw what she had not perceived in the dim light, that it was the same person in the dress of the Oratory whose glance she had met at the moment of her baptism, and another look satisfied her that it was indeed Mr. Morris. And now he came forward, and in his own gentle tone greeted her exactly in the same way as he used to do in former days. 'You said we should meet again,' said he, 'in the bosom of our mighty Mother; and will you allow me to be the first to welcome you thither.'

tations had indeed ceased, and she felt that the most solemn moment of her life was at hand; but still the dull weight of doubt hung over her; the Soe of God was really coming to dwell with her; but how would He regard her? Would He now think she had left the place in His vineyard that he had allotted to her? impatiently fretted at a meagre system, and sought for herself what He did not intend her to possess; and then how could He love to abide with her? She heard the 'Gloria in excelsis' intoned, the Creed chanted, and then the solemn moment of silence that followed the rich strain, 'Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth; pleni sunt cœli et terra, majestatis gloria tua.' Still it was all pageant and outside show; it spoke not to her heart. Suddenly that moment of silence was broken. Clara felt that every head was in the dust, and, roused for a moment, she quickly raised her eyes. The pure white form that had once, and once only, met her eyes, was held aloft by the bending priest—the veiled glory of the Lord of Hosts was revealed, and every heart and head was in adoration. 'To him that overcometh I will give the hidden manna, and will give him a white counter; and in the counter a new name written, which no man knoweth but he that receiveth it,' seemed whispered to Clara's heart; and that moment of unspeakable delight (given as a foretaste of what God was about to shower upon her) when she had once before gazed on the hidden presence of the Lord of Glory, rushed on her memory. She could not bend her head; she could but gaze till it disappeared from her eye, while the beautiful words of one of those very Oratory Fathers rung on in her ears: 'Ring joyously, ye solemn bells; And wave, oh, wave, ye censers bright; 'Tis Jesus cometh, Mary's Son, And God of God, and Light of Light! O earth, grow flowers beneath His feet! And thou, O sun, shine bright this day! He comes! He comes! O Heaven on earth! Our Jesus comes upon His way.'

And then the choir took up the strain, and chanted forth the glorious welcome of the Jewish children—'Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domine. Hosanna in excelsis!' She was again absorbed; but the mystical moment was at last come, and Clara Leslie was to be the temple of the Holy Ghost. For the first time that dear Lord, Whom she had so long sought and loved, so long 'felt after' and not found, was to take possession of His own, and to abide in that heart, cleansed and purified from every stain for His approach, for ever. Catherine gently touched her, and she saw her rise and go towards the altar. The priest was already standing, with his face towards her, on the altar-steps, and several had already left their seats. She hastily followed, and as she knelt by Catherine's side; her heart fluttered, and her hands trembled as she clasped them before her, and bent down over the altar-rails. The feeling of intense awe was almost overpowering. Nearer and nearer came the officiating priest; once, twice, thrice, did the low voice fall upon her ear—'Corpus Domini Jesu Christi custodiam animam tuam in vitam eternam. Amen.' It was Catherine's turn. She felt the slight movement that accompanied the reception of her Lord; but the first five words had been pronounced ere Clara raised her head. Once more she caught a glimpse of 'the vast Creator, reposing, infant-like, in His creature's hand,'—the pure, round, white Form raised above her in the sign of blessing,—and in another instant it was resting on her own lips.—All was accomplished. A flash of light seemed to pass instantaneously through her soul; and, vanquished and dismayed, the tempter fled. 'He comes! He comes, the Lord of hosts, Borne on His Throne triumphantly, We see Thee and we know Thee, Lord, And yearn to shed our blood for Thee. Our hearts leap up; our trembling song Grows fainter still; we can no more. Silence! and let us weep and die Of every love while we adore, Great Sacrament of love divine! All, all we have and are, be Thine.'

High Mass had been long over; Low Mass after Low Mass was being celebrated. It was not a night when sleep could easily visit a new convert's eyes, and Clara still knelt untired before the altar. She was so perfectly still, that Catherine Temple, though fearing for the effects of this night of excitement, could not disturb her; and, absorbed in the sweet recollections that crowded upon her mind of that very night the year before, would have been very loth to tear herself away. As to the young convert, she indeed realised that the tempter 'could not stand the presence of the Lord of Hosts.' Overwhelmed in the inutterable sweetness of that hour, she saw and heard nothing but the presence of 'Him Whom her soul loved.' We will not intrude into the mysterious rapture of those moments; these are things to be experienced, not described. Prostrate in adoration before Him, she seemed to hear Him whisper to her heart, 'O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?' and tears of silent ecstasy, as Clara had never shed, chased one after another softly and slowly down her cheeks. One thought absorbed her and held her captive, as by a spell. She had found Him; 'she held Him, and she would not let Him go; she possessed Him, not spiritually, but really in truth. The race was over, the goal was won; she had sought, and she, too, had found. She stirred not; she feared to break the chain that bound her to the Feet of her risen and present Lord. All the past was one long painful dream, the present the only reality; the veil that hangs before the unseen world was withdrawn, and even in that moment of unspeakable delight she seemed to feel the form of her guardian angel veiling his radiant face before the glory of Him who dwelt within her, and to see the tears of angelic joy that he shed over the lost one found,—the poor wandering lamb restored to the one Fold. The sweet and well known tones of Alan's voice at last aroused her. He was standing at foot of the altar of the Blessed Virgin in his sacerdotal garments, and the first word she heard him utter were these: 'Emittite lucem tuam et veritatem tuam; ipsa me deduxerunt et adduxerunt in montem sanctum tuum, et in tabernacula tua!'

long dream; and the idea that she was really a Catholic, and was never more to obey the summons of those Anglican bells—that what she had seen the night before was not a rich treat never more to be enjoyed, but a thing to be, for the whole rest of her life, of daily occurrence and duty,—rushed upon her mind, and gave her such abundant alacrity to her movements, that a few minutes sufficed her to dress; and then, having poured forth in a few ardent words the grateful emotions of her soul, with a light step and sparkling eye she sought the breakfast parlour. 'What saw ye, O shepherds? Tell it unto us. Who has appeared upon earth?' she chanted in her low, sweet voice, as she came silently behind Catherine's chair, and flung her arms round her neck without being perceived. 'The Saviour is born, and choirs of Angels praise the Lord. Alleluia! alleluia!' responded in the same sweet tones, a person whose presence she had not remarked; and she turned from one so very dear to receive the morning greeting of one dearer still. 'Alleluia, indeed,' she replied, as he looked in her face, and said tenderly: 'I see I need not ask if all is well. God has given you rest, my poor wandering, weary one.'

The clang of the bells ringing for the eleven o'clock service on all sides awoke Clara next morning. She started up, threw open the window-shutters and curtains,—which Catherine had carefully closed to exclude all the light, when she had left her in bed a few hours before,—scarcely realising where she was, or what had happened. She could scarcely believe it all,—it seemed one