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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

Mr. Leslie looked grave, and another question was started: the font, where was it to be placed? It had been neatly restored and scraped from its white wash, and altogether was a handsome object. Mr. Leslie suggested it was a pity to hide away near the door; but this was soon overruled by Douglas, who picked up an old book of litanies in the vestry, which had the Canons at the end, and proved, to every one's satisfaction that the door was the proper place, and that near must be a poor-box. Mr. Wingfield undertook to send down an appropriate drawing; so his knotty point too was settled. They now again approached the chancel, and Mr. Wingfield asked what was to stand above the altar. Clara, who was the person addressed, began an animated account of the beauty of some illuminated Commandments which had been ordered; which she simply added, 'will hide up all these empty niches, and make it look less bare.' She could not, with all her knowingness, decipher Mr. Wingfield's countenance at this announcement; she only made out he was not as delighted as she expected. Alan's face was quite intelligible; it was more downcast than ever, and he uttered, half to himself, something which a quick glance from Mr. Wingfield showed his quick ears had again caught: 'Oh, when will the tabernacle of the Lord of ore, blazing in jewelry, return to deck our towers instead of the cold Judaism of the ancient age?'

Clara felt annoyed, and was greatly relieved when her father proposing to try the chancel for the altar among themselves before they left the church. Mr. Wingfield earnestly joined in requesting them to do it, and walked to the other side of the church to enjoy it the better. Alan seemed to take no notice; but when the blending voices had struck up, in beautiful harmony, the first words of the Benedictus, he seemed used and softened. It was a beautifully harmonized single chant of Purcell's, in five parts, the part entwining with the other in endless succession, always varying yet ever the same; and the practiced voices seemed as if one, so well at every word rested upon, and accentuated together, and modulated to rise and fall at different portions of the canticle exactly in unison. Alan's clear tenor seemed to increase in beauty in every verse, and the echo of the roof to prolong its sweet notes. The chant was suited to his melancholy feelings, and Clara's eyes filled with tears as the fast verse almost finished forth, it was so soft and tenderly beautiful, came with a double meaning to her now young ear: 'To give light to them that sit in darkness in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet in the way of peace.'

His voice lingered on that closing word, and was only when the last echo died away that the organ burst forth, as if by common consent, in a Catholic hymn of all ages, 'Glory be to the altar, and to the Son,' &c. 'This is a treat I have not had for a long time,' said Mr. Wingfield, when they all, in perfect silence, had left the church and took the way to the Rectory. 'I never heard a more excellent specimen of Anglican chanting. I thought had quite lost my taste for that style, in my love of the Gregorian chant.'

Clara's cheek glowed with delight. The singing was her hobby; perhaps there was a little vanity unconsciously mixed up with her pleasure. 'How dost thou steal away the merit of thy own best actions! Poor vain man! Dead and ashes!—wherefore art thou proud?'

CHAPTER V.—COMING TROUBLES.

'They sought her bath by bow and bed; The lady was found!'—Walter Scott.

Mr. Wingfield stayed to dinner, and conversation on different subjects engrossed the attention of the whole party. Clara, however, seemed absent, and at about nine o'clock stole out of the room. It was a beautiful moonlight night, and she and her mother had agreed to walk home together, escorted by Douglas and Mr. Wingfield, as was their guest. An animated conversation is begun between the latter and Mr. Leslie, as Selwyn occasionally joining; and the hours slip on unperceived. Mildred, busily occupied at a large frame near the table, was listening to some earnest communications of Douglas's, and Alan seemed absorbed in a book. An hour more must have gone by since Clara left the room, when he rose, and asked Mildred where she could be. The answer was, that she must have been tired and gone to her room; but Alan ought he could see a half-smile on Mildred's face. He said nothing, however; but presently, perceiving, stepped out on the lawn, gained the chancel entrance, and was soon at the door of Clara's room. The moonlight was streaming into the room; but all was silent and empty.

'Clara!' said he, as he approached the little room next to it; but here again the moonlight revealed the bed as yet undisturbed. He had no wish for any more company, and strolled out into the shrubbery. It was natural for him to follow the winding path that led to the gate of the churchyard; and it was equally natural to lean on that gate, contemplating the gray walls of the church, thrown into deep shadow by the moon, which had risen behind it. Suddenly he thought he saw a pale light glimmering from the chancel window. He must be mistaken! but no! it was certainly there, looking like the solitary lamp he had seen many a time gleaming at nightfall from the windows of Catholic chapels—the ever-burning lamp of the sanctuary, which he knew so well. It was very odd; and he suddenly threw his legs over the gate, and quietly crossed the churchyard. As he expected, the door of the church was unlocked. Noiselessly he opened it, and closed it behind him. Then the mystery was unravelled. There was a solitary wax-light standing on the rickety old rails, and by it knelt a figure in white. At that moment she had laid down the book she had been holding; her hands were clasped together on the rails, and her dark eyes raised; and thus motionless, she looked to Alan's eyes, like the guardian angel of the profaned and desolate shrine still lingering around the ruin of what once was so dear to God and man. He did not disturb her; but gliding to the foot of the beautiful but mutilated screen, knelt down, and, hiding his face, was soon himself absorbed in as deep, but far more painful and heart-rending, reflections. He had parted two days before with his best-loved companion and friend, uncertain whether that friend was not on the eve of committing what, to his sensitive conscience, haunted him as perhaps a deadly sin. He had accompanied that friend through all the stages of his progress to Catholic truth, and now saw himself thrown, as it were, adrift to battle with a cold system, and a colder world, which his warm affections revolted from alone, unless he could make up his mind to follow him into a system from which he shrunk as one untried and unknown, however powerfully he might feel himself drawn towards it. There was still a veil before his eyes; he could not fully see the absolute duty of entire submission to the Catholic Church; and, plunged in a sea of doubts and conflicts, at times it seemed impossible to him to maintain that gaiety which was expected from him at home. He longed for some one to whom to unburden himself. Douglas would not understand him; his was a mind deeply imbued with strong High-Church principles, but, at the same time, utterly unable to understand the warmth and tenderness and depth of Catholic love and devotion which Alan lived in. Clara, too—he felt that in time she would grow into all that he could wish; but for the present she was not formed enough to comprehend any one's longing for help beyond the Anglican system, which filled all the wants of her soul, simply because she had never tasted of anything else. He poured forth his whole soul in prayer, and, for the first time for many a long year, the guardian saint of the old building was again invoked to intercede for a worshipper kneeling at its ancient shrine. The old clock of the tower awoke him from his meditations. Suddenly it rung out through the silent night, with a deep and melancholy sound; and Alan, suddenly roused, rose with a start, for the chime seemed endless;—it was just midnight. The white figure at the altar tarred at the same moment, and Alan saw that he was discovered; for her cheek became as pale as marble and the candle dropping from her hand, no light was left but the brilliant moon, still streaming in at the chancel window. He hastened to reassure her by his voice, and in a moment Clara's arms were round his neck, and she was sobbing convulsively.

'O Alan! how could you frighten me so!' she murmured after a few minutes, in which he endeavoured in vain to soothe and tranquilize her. 'I did not mean to frighten you, Clara; indeed, I do not know how many hours I have been here keeping vigils with you,' he replied; 'but really you must not do these kind of things; you will make yourself ill, and, besides, it is not exactly proper. Somebody might frighten you in good earnest at this late hour.'

'But how could you get in Alan?' said Clara. 'I am sure I locked the door behind me.' 'No, you did not, my sweet one,' said he; 'for I found it open.'

'How stupid of me,' said Clara. 'I did not mean to stay so late; but when once here, it was so tempting to linger on. All is so still and silent and holy here now. O Alan, the midnight hours are the happiest moments of my life; don't deprive me of them,' she added imploringly. 'But, Clara,' he replied, 'are you quite right in doing all these kind of things without your father's knowledge? for I am sure he would not approve of it.'

'I don't know,' said she, hesitatingly and mournfully. 'I didn't think St. Simon Stylites told his father, or any one else, when he tied that cord round his waist, and let it eat into his flesh.'

Alan almost smiled, and the thought crossed him, 'Oh, for Catholic direction to guide such a mind as this! I am incapable of it.'

'Dear child,' said he, 'you surely do not mean to imitate all St. Simon Stylites did. It is only the few whom God leads by such peculiar ways; they are not meant for common Christians. No confessor in the Church of Rome would allow anything of the sort without especial leave.'

'You are always talking about the Church of Rome, Alan,' said Clara; 'but I do not belong to the Church of Rome. I am an Anglican; what is her authority to me?'

Alan almost groaned aloud. 'Would that you did, Clara,' said he almost unconsciously; 'such a mind as yours would not then be allowed to run waste at will, but would be pruned and tended from infancy into the beautiful plant God Almighty intended it to be. But come,' he added, 'let us be going home, it is so very late.'

Clara seemed to hesitate a moment; but there was no help for it, and closing the door, she took her brother's arm, as they slowly bent their way to the Rectory. They had not gone a few steps before Alan discovered the reason of her reluctance. He glanced at her feet, and, as he had suspected, they were bare. He said nothing but could scarcely restrain a smile, though he really began to fear the results of these ascetic habits on her health. He scarcely knew how to persuade her she was wrong, as he did not know how deep the motive for them lay.

'So young, so innocent!' thought he; 'what sins has this pure soul to expiate? Clara,' he continued aloud, 'tell me why you practice all these austerities!'

'O Alan,' said Clara mournfully, 'could any one face that fearful doctrine of post-baptismal sin, and not attempt to do away the stains contracted on one's white robe of purity. I am so light-hearted; and yet sometimes I could resolve never to smile again. O Alan, I am too happy. I am like the tyrant Polycrates—I fear my own happiness.'

'Poor child,' said Alan, tenderly; 'and so your innocent mind has been harrowed up by contemplating that fearful doctrine,' as you well call it, in all its naked loneliness, and there was no one near to tell you of the balm of Gilead that grew hard by,—in the motherly tenderness of our Catholic mother.'

'I have heard of a balm,' said she earnestly; 'and, Alan,' she continued, her heart beating fast with the effort, 'I have heard that it is to be had in the Anglican Church. Oh, what would I give for it. Can it be true?'

'Do you mean confession, Clara?' inquired Alan. Clara only pressed closer to her brother's side, and the one word 'yes' which breathed her long pent up secret, even into Alan's ear, was pronounced as if she were afraid the very moonlight and the silent dead would betray it; and then she waited breathlessly for the answer.

'And so you, too, Clara dearest, have had part in that longing after a closer walk with God, and a higher degree of perfection with which God has silently been leavening far and wide our island-home,' replied he. How wonderfully God works! touching hearts here and there, so far apart from one another, at one and the same time, with His quickening grace.'

'It is all well,' said Clara, 'for those who never face what sin is: but when, day by day, the catalogue is examined and summed up, it is a load which sometimes seems insupportable. O Alan!' she continued, suddenly stopping, shuddering, and hiding her face in both hands, 'what a dreadful thought,—For every idle word we shall have to give an account in the day of judgment!' and wrong feelings, wrong actions, wrong words—they are unnumberable as the sand of the sea. What then must the idle ones be?'

'And do you think such penance can wipe out such a load of sin, Clara dearest?' said Alan. 'Wipe it out, Alan!'—they were now standing by the churchyard gate, and she leaned her spread hands on it, and buried her face;—'the penance itself is full of sin. I once thought I could soon attain perfection; but it is like mounting some inaccessible range of hills; no sooner is one ascent gained than another spreads before you, and the work is endless: and not only that, but when you think you have attained your aim, you all of a sudden seem exactly where you were before. I long to be purified from sin, but I cannot get rid of it, and I know not where to turn.'

'And do you think you can purify yourself, my dearest Clara?' said Alan. 'There is but one who can answer your longings, and there is but one place where we shall at least be perfectly pure.'

Clara looked up. 'It is strange to hear you say so, Alan,' said she; 'this is just what papa says; but I thought it was only Evangelicals who talked in that way, and who thought perfection unattainable in this world. This is what makes me think so of confession. I think it must be such a help to perfection. The very shame of telling one's faults would make one keep out of them.'

'You think nothing of the strengthening grace of absolution,' replied Alan. Clara seemed puzzled. This was above her. She had no idea of the Sacrament of penance as yet. Confession must be practised to prove to the soul that it is not the mere human shame of telling one's faults that will purify her, but the power of those mystical words of absolution to impart peace and pardon and new vigour, to run on cheerfully in the hard road of perfection.—She remained silent for some time; then, pursuing the train of her own thoughts, continued, 'And now, Alan, can you understand my longing for a nunery? There, in fasts and vigils, and Hours and prayers, one could hope to attain what one cannot in this every-day world.'

'There are great thoughts of founding Sisterhood of Charity in connexion with the Anglican Church,' said Alan musingly. 'Oh, but that will not do for me,' said Clara eagerly. 'I should have quite enough to do in purifying my own soul, without minding those of others. I could not be a Sister of Charity.'

'Poor Clara,' said Alan smiling, 'we shall see you end your days among the nuns of the Holy Sepulchre at New Hall, I suppose.'

'No; I will get some one to found an Anglican nunery exactly like them,' replied Clara. 'O Alan, how happy must be their life. I could almost find it in my heart to be a Trappist—that wonderful order that never speak.'

Alan heaved a long, long, deep sigh, and turned away. 'Alan, what is the matter! Why do you sigh in that way?'

'You make me think of my friend De Grey, Clara,' she replied. 'He used once to speak in that way.'

'And has anything happened, Alan, to make you sigh over him. Is he ill?' asked Clara, who well knew the name. 'Not ill in body,' said Alan mournfully; 'but, Clara, I am now alone in the world. He was to have been received, the day I left Oxford, into the Church of Rome.'

Clara was struck dumb; a sudden pang shot through her heart. 'And Mr. Newman, Alan!' said she. 'There is not a doubt, Clara, on the mind of any one who has acquaintance with him, as to what he is very shortly about to do. What has happened is only the first shock of the mighty earthquake which will shake us to our very foundations.'

'But it is all over, then,' said Clara after a long pause; 'every one will follow Mr. Newman. One feels something like Moore in his "Banquet-hall Deserted"—as if there was nothing left for it but to prepare to follow.'

'All will not follow,' replied Alan; 'many will yet make a stand. Many will draw back and be frightened, others will press on.'

He paused. Clara looked steadily at him. 'And you, Alan?'

He again turned away. 'I know nothing, Clara,' said he in a voice of anguish. 'So far I will tell you, and then you must ask no more. Much depends upon these two months of quiet I am to spend here.' He clasped his hands over his forehead, and went on rapidly: 'I have refused to see De Grey again till they are over, and even then only under conditions. He goes immediately to begin his novitiate with the Passionists in London. I have given up reading; prayer must now cut the knot I cannot unravel. I have put myself into God's hands, and whither He wills me to go, thither I am ready to follow. Clara, you will not forget to pray for me.'

It was the first time such a request had crossed Alan's lips to his sister, and she could only answer by her tears. He went on: 'It will be a sad blow for Douglas and Mildred on their marriage, for I should think all must be decided before the end of October; and I believe they have settled St. Michael and All Angels for their wedding day; but if it is to be God's Will be done.'

'And papa, Alan?' said Clara; 'dear, dear papa?'

'Do not speak of it,' said Alan, quickly, 'I cannot face it yet. God spare me this anguish.'

He clasped his hands, and remained some minutes absorbed in prayer, while Clara wept unrestrainedly. They neither could say more, and, as if by one consent, moved on through the shrubbery towards the house. The moon had traversed the heavens, and now threw the door by which they were to enter into the shade, while it illuminated the front windows of the drawing room on the other side of the house. It was fas-

tened, and they walked round the house, to enter by the glass windows on the lawn. They were still open, and a light was in the library, which adjoined the drawing room. 'Papa is still up,' whispered Clara, 'finishing his sermon.'

Alan folded her in his arms, and kissed her with more than his usual tenderness, and Clara glided up stairs. Alan could not sleep,—and he remained outside, walking on the lawn. Presently he approached the window of the library, and looked at the scene within. It was a small room, lighted by one lamp, which stood on the table; round the walls, up to the very ceiling, were ranged books, from the large folios at the bottom, to the smaller ones that adorned the top shelves. The well-known ladder, with its pretty carpeting, which seemed inseparable from Clara and her peregrinations round the library, stood full in view; Mildred's frame had been removed into this room, and stood close by the window; Douglas's flute lay carelessly upon it; a favorite footstool of Clara's was standing near,—all spoke to his heart of the calm domestic happiness that reigned within. At the table sat Mr. Leslie, still with the pen in his hand, his back turned to the window, so that Alan could only see the outline of his tall figure bending over his writing.—Alan's heart sunk within him as he thought of the sorrow he was about to bring into that happy circle; and as he looked at the library-steps, he almost reproached himself with the active part he had taken the year before in initiating Clara into all the mysteries which might now bring upon her, very soon, the nights of sleepless anguish that he was enduring. But that evening's conversation had shown him too plainly the hand of God working silently on her pure and enthusiastic mind to bring it to Himself, to allow him to dwell long on this reproachful feeling. He paced up and down in silence; all that his wounded heart could utter was, 'They will be done.' He fancied he heard a voice, and again approached the window. Mr. Leslie had put up his papers, and now, kneeling by the table, was pouring out his soul in prayer to God,—so earnestly and absorbedly, that unconsciously he prayed aloud.—His hands were joined, and his arms rested on the table; his eyes were raised fixedly to heaven, and the snow-white hair waving round the bald head gave it almost the appearance of a halo of glory resting round the head of one of the old Saints at prayer. Alan gazed till his eyes were dim; but when words of earnest entreaty for himself and his sister fell from his aged lips, especially that God would lead them into 'all truth, and not suffer them to be led away by any thing that was contrary to His Divine Will,' it was more than he could bear. He mastered himself with an effort: 'God hear thee, and our Blessed Lady intercede for thee, my father!' he murmured; and glided noiseless into the house, he gained the door of his room unperceived. It adjoined Clara's. He stood for a moment, and thought he heard a stifled sob. He opened the door. It was Clara, indeed. She was in bed, but trying in vain to stifle an agony of weeping. Few but a convert can appreciate the almost heart-broken feeling that crossed Alan's heart as he again tried to soothe the agitated girl. 'I could not sleep, Alan; I could only lie still and cry,—and pray for you,' said she, when she recognised him.

Alan could but mingle his tears with hers; he was quite overcome. 'My father is praying for us below,' he said; 'he little knows how much I need his prayers; but it is comfort to think that such fervent intercessions are ascending for one. Dearest Clara, cannot this comfort you?'

Clara looked up, and almost smiled. 'If ye be without chastisement, then are ye bastards, and not sons.' I am comforted, Alan. Her words were balm.

'This is a vigil, indeed, Clara,' said he; 'and now your guardian angel will perhaps be a better comforter than I.'

He left her, and she soon fell into an agitated slumber. It was Clara's first night of sorrow.

CHAPTER VI.—THE FEAST OF ST. MICHAEL. 'Thou hast taken her in gladness From the altar's holy shrine. Oh, remember, in her sadness, She is thine, and only thine!' Old Song.

The Sun had risen high ere Clara awoke; tired out, she had at last slept. She quickly arose with a feeling of self-reproach; but the church-bells had begun to ring before breakfast was over. Alan had already eaten his, and walked out, 'tired of waiting,' as Mrs. Wallis said. Mr. Leslie had been as late as his daughter, and he now came forth from his room with a large needle in his hand, putting in the last 'stitch' to his finished sermon, in its neat black leather case. Clara, in her pretty white muslin dress, with its pink ribbons, and the little white-and-pink roses that garnished her light bunnet, was waiting at the door, parasol and cross-embroidered Bible and prayer-book in hand. She surrey-