Anna Clayton;

—OR—

The Enquirer after Truth.

CHAPTER I.

"Green fields and silent glens! We come
To spend this summer day with you."

Noontime in a farmer's house, on a sultry summer day, is a picture all are familar with. Windows and doors are thrown open to their utmost capacity to admit any passing puff of wind which may chance to stray that way; and the various members of the household who have turned away with sated appetites from the well-spread board, lounge here and there, as inclination may dictate—upon the chairs or floor—within the balcony—or on the green grass beneath the shielding branches of some neighboring tree, enjoying an hour of unbroken stillness and repose.

In Nature's vast domain of forest and field, there is a depth of stillness only equalled by the noon of night. The cattle have left their grazing in the open field, and sought the babbling brook and the overhanging tree. The birds, which awoke a chorus of melody in the orchards and meadows, when the day was cool and fresh, have now sought the deep wood, and underneath the dense foliage are dreaming bird dreams. Everything is at rest. Even the white clouds which hang up against the blue of heaven, seem motionless and changeless as the eternal hills beneath them.

And at this hour in an arm-chair with his feet elevated to the window-sill, sits Elder Clayton—the senior member of the Clayton family. He is evidently thinking, not of the fields on which his eyes are resting, although they seem to linger there with the pride of ownership; but evidently of another field of labor, where the seed is the word, and the harvest the souls of men. He is a strong-built, muscular man, and shows the marks of toil in the natural as well as the spiritual field. He wears an honest broad face, and a kindly smile.

Near him sits a fair young girl, with a broad, full brow, and deep, thoughtful eyes. Her pervading air is one of quiet dignity and calm repose. She is reading—is always reading. She is called Anna Clayton, though her real name is Ella Forbes. She was left an orphan, when a small child, and has lived in this family, shared its comforts and privileges as though she were a natural heir.

Almost at her feet, lying upon the floor with Sporter—who, by the way, is a large Newfoundland dog, answering, at present, for a pillow—is George; a young man of twenty, and an only child.

Nearly behind this group is Mrs Clayton, in an old straight-backed chair, and sits as straight and prim as the chair itself. She is the only one of the family who never finds a leisure hour, and at this moment is knitting as though her life depended on it. She has a compressed mouth, thin, peaked nose, and sharp eyes, with a flash in them. You will discover, at a glance, that she is a woman of an indomitable will, and capable of strong prejudices and bitter animosities.

"What is it you are reading?" she said, glancing over her spectacles in her most impressive manner. "What is it you are reading, Anna?"

The truth was, she knew well enough, but thought it a proper time to evince her displeasure.

"It is a book I got at Uncle's, the other day," she replied. "It treats of the different kinds of denominational faith, under their different heads; or, rather, it is an exposition of them, as prepared by their most eminent men; together with a review, or summing up, of the arguments by the editor. I think it is very interesting."

"What, did you get it at John's? He is one of the rankest kind of Methodists. I don't believe it's fit to be read," continued Mrs. Clayton.

"If it's all as sound Baptist orthodoxy," said George, "as that which Anna and I were reading last night, I don't think mother Clayton would object it to. How is it Anna? Is it sound all the way through?"

"It treats also of other kinds of denominational faith," she replied, "or else it would not be correctly titled."

"Well, yes, of course," continued George; "but what heresy does it inculcate? That's the point at issue, as our old college Prof. would say."

"I'm not prepared to answer such a question," she replied, gravely; "but I hope to know sometime why these differences distract the Christian world."

"These differences are very sad," said Elder Clayton. "Of course we would like to have them all see as we see. But if they *won't*, why I'm sure it is'nt our fault. Yes, my children," he continued, looking round as though speaking to a congregation, "no one laments these things more than we do; they come right home to our hearts. We would be glad to embrace in the arms of Christian love and fellowship, every kindred, tongue, and people, if they would but come in the proper manner, and in the gospel order of things."

"Come under the water, I suppose;" George suggested, glancing mischievously at Anna, from under his heavy eye-lashes.

"George, hav'nt you any respect for sacred things?" exclaimed his mother, sternly.

"Why, what did I say? Nothing bad was it? Somehow there is always something slipping from my tongue wrong end first. I can never get the right word in the right place. Sis, hand me that book. I'm bound to do something for my country yet. I'll blow those *Pedos* up so high, they won't come down in a century—see if I don't." Thus saying, George took the book, and holding it off at arm's length, scrutinized it closely on its several sides; then closely shutting his eyes, opened it by chance, and read with the earnestness of a school-boy conning his first lesson in a new book.

"The great question now before the Christian world, and the only one that divides it in fellowship and communion, is that of Baptism. On one side it is maintained that the only proper way of administering it, is by the immersion of believers in water on the profession of their faith; and on the other hand, that it may be, and is, just as properly administered by sprinkling and pouring, as by immersion; and that the children of believers are included in the privileges of the rite. The defenders of the first position, generally known as Baptists, insist on adhering to the literal meaning of the Greek word, *baptizo*, and consequently maintain, that a command to baptize, is a command to *immerse*.

"They also defend their practice, from the phrase, "Buried with him in Baptism," and from the early custom of repairing to rivers to administer the ordinance. They further claim, with the greatest assurance, to be the only true Church of Christ.

"On the other hand those known as Pedobaptists declare that *baptizo* would not be correctly rendered by the term immerse; but that it is a *generic* term, implying only the rite of baptism, with no reference whatever to the mode. That baptism is symbolic, an emblem of the purifying influences of the Holy Spirit, and that the grand and leading type of purification instituted by Jehovah himself, is sprinkling; that immersion can nowhere be found in the Bible as an ordinance, either implied, acknowledged, sanctioned or commanded."

"That will do, George," said Elder Clayton, hitching nervously in his chair: "it appears to me that is an unwarrantable position."

"Unwarrantable!" exclaimed Mrs. Clayton, who had been rapidly brimming up, and, now there was one drop too many added, she went off in a torrent: "Unwarrantable, I guess it is—its blasphemy! I wish I'd throw'd the book into the fire! I don't see what any body wants to meddle with such things for. My father and mother lived and died in the Baptist Church, and that faith is good enough for me; and now just to hear the like of that, that there ain't any immersion in the Bible—It's blasphemy! that's what it is—I won't hear such stuff!" And she bolted from the room, slamming the door after her in a manner that enforced her opinions.

There followed an awkward pause. George rolled his eyes up towards Anna, and drew down his mouth for an inaudible whistle: but Anna sat rivoted to her chair, as though suddenly stricken by a power that deprived her of motion. Fortunately the silence was broken by a horse and horseman coming up on a leisurely trot to the gate. The man dismounted, took off a capacious pair of saddlebags, and, pulling his hat down over his eyes, with true clerical dignity, walked up to the door. Elder Clayton greeted him warmly, and the two walked into the study.

"There now," said George, "that's what I call an interposition of Providence; nothing else could have sent father Longwind here, just at this time, on one of his longwinded visits. Anna, what's the matter? Why don't you look up?"

"George, you won't turn away from me, will you, if all the rest of the world does?—You will pity me?" She said this in a tone of hopeless pleading.

"Pity you? Why, what for, Anna?"

"I do not know what to do."

"Do? Why let them blow away, to be sure: guess I'd read what I was a mind to, for all anybody says—if they don't want to hear it, why, they know their privilege."

"But, George, they have been kind to me—as truly a father and mother to me as to you; what have I—what am I—that I do not owe to their care and indulgence? and to do anything to grieve them——"

"As for that, it seems to me to be a small matter to read or not to read a book" replied George, interrupting her.

"A *small* matter! So it may seem to them and to you, but to me it is a fearful necessity. George, sit down here, and I will tell you how it is with me. I look around the world upon a strangely intermingled mass of good and evil. I see some natures almost wholly given up to depravity, rolling sin as a sweet morsel under their tongues, and others professing to be good, professing to be children of one common Father, recipients of the same atoning blood, under the same laws, to be travellers and pilgrims here with *one* object, to labour in a common cause, and to be journeying to the same eternal blessed rest;—and yet I see this body of professing Christians split up into factions, and so blinded by prejudice, as almost to forget their Master's work, in zeal for their own particular sect—it grieves me. And when one starts up and says, *You* are altogether wrong, and *we* are altogether right; your church, is *no church*, and ours is the only *true* church—it startles me, and I wish to know by what right they urge such claims as these. Now I feel it my duty to profess Christ before the world. I cannot do this without connecting myself with some existing body of Christians. Can I do this blindly, knowing but one sect, and making this sect my *Master's kingdom*? No! I dare not.—Should I go with my friends, allowing them to be a guide to my conscience—believing as they believe, simply because they believe it? Can they stand before the judgment-seat of Christ in my stead and answer for me? No! you know they cannot—then how can they here? This matter is entirely between my soul and God. Do you not, then, see that it is an imperative necessity with me, that I go contrary to their wishes? Do you wonder that I feel that it is at my soul's peril if I refuse to investigate, decide, and act?"

"That is very reasonable, Anna," said George; "just so I have thought it over and over, only, you see, I sum it up differently. I say to myself, that it is evident from the facts in the case, that the devil has it pretty much his own way, and will get the larger part of them, and me too, if we go on the way we are going; and——"

"O George, I wish you felt a deeper interest in these things."

"And so I would if all the world were like you, Anna; but there is no use talking about that. You said, Pity me—I *do* pity you, Anna, with your views of individual responsibility, your all-embracing brotherly love and fellowship, which I admit are true Gospel principles, and if *lived* out would make all the world Christians—with your clear insight into the absurdity of things, and your shrinking, sensitive soul—why, Anna, if you are to be thrown into this whirlpool of contending elements and prejudices, you might, better by far, throw yourself into Maelstrom's whirling waters—family hoping at some time to be cast out upon the coast of Norway—that's my opinion."

But, George, should I not follow the path of duty, no matter where it leads me?"

"Yes, go on, Anna, and may Heaven guard you—and if it don't, I don't know what will."

"Thank you, George: that strengthens me, and I begin to feel brave to do, and strong to bear."

"But Anna," said George, breaking the silence which followed, in which both seemed lost in their own thoughts, "you have no conception of the strength of religious prejudices—you can never bear up against them. After all, I believe my philosophy is the wisest. What can a body do but take the world as he finds it: laugh at its absurdities, whether they be comic or tragic, and let it go at that. This world is a thankless master. How has it regarded some of its greatest benefactors whilst living? You know how it was with our Saviour. And even in modern times, you know how it has been with such men as Columbus, Galileo, Milton, Bunyan, Baxter, and a host of reformers. To be sure, after they were dead, they began to estimate what these men had done for the world's progress; and many of them have been tossed and lauded ever since in a way that must be astonishing to those illustrious shades, if they walk to and fro in the earth, and up and down in it, as a certain wicked one did in olden times. The fact is Anna, if a luckless wight happens to stumble on an idea which is in advance of the world's progress, he is laughed at, and forthwith every ragged urchin or upstart in the street thinks it his duty to throw rotten eggs at him. What they do after his death isn't of much consequence—wouldn't be to me, anyhow: it don't provide his bread and butter when he most wants it. So you see my philosophy is a sort of necessity to me, as yours is to you. Come, Anna, what do you say to that?" said George, for she was silent, sad, and thoughtful, with her eyes fixed on the floor.

"There is much truth in what you say, George. But it seems to me, when one gigantic mind soars up above its fellows, and grasps a principle involving a great good, and bestows it upon the world free as the winds and waters of heaven, knowing that the world will deride the gift, or its object, and the one who bestowed it; refusing in its blindness or ignorance, or accepting it thanklessly, that that mind has arrived at the highest possible point of moral grandeur attainable in this world. He approaches the Divine standard, just in proportion to the unselfishness of the object. And I would rather be such an one, with bread and water for my food, the skins of beasts for my clothing, and a cave of the earth for my dwelling-place, than to have the wealth of princes, and live as selfishly as most of the world are living. No. Let us labor for the world's good. If there are evils, let us make an effort to eradicate them. Let not our own good be the one object of life, but also the good of others. Let us seek to know the right—to do the right—to maintain the right—live for it and die for it, if need be—we cannot die in a better cause."

"Poh! Anna, you are an enthusiast—a dreamer! True, it *sounds* well enough, but it won't do to *live* in this manner, the way the world goes now. The mischief is, every one thinks that he is right—no matter what absurd notions he gets into his head—he is right—he and his alone are right. And they invariably make up, for lack of argument to sustain their position, by pertinaciously insisting that they know they're right!"

"But truth *must* triumph," responded Anna, "and the world is making progress, though we need not trouble ourselves about the effect of this or that cause: the question is, *is it right?*" If it *is*, then, there is the path of duty—walk ye in it. God controls the results. If I cannot convince all the world of truth, that is no reason why I should *forsake* it. If I cannot make this or that error appear to the minds of others—if I fail—my object was not so much to make others see as I see, as to satisfy my own conviction of duty, and to stand justified before God. It seems to me, that the first thing to be learned is, *to know for myself what is* Truth, and then fearlessly to oppose the wrong."

"Anna, you are a brave girl. I believe you have motives to actuate you, and principles to sustain you that I know nothing about. Why I verily believe you would walk up to the stake, as you would to your dinner. I thought that kind of people were all dead long ago. It must be that they are, Anna, and I'm afraid your notions will have to warp a little—just a little, you know—'twould'nt be of much consequence, and the world would go on so much smoother."

Anna did not reply. George was older, and had seen much more of the world:—his warning sounded fearfully ominous, and she inwardly prayed to be kept from the evil to come.

Within the study which was on the second floor of the Clayton house, the two ministerial friends sat engaged in earnest conversation. The windows were thrown open to admit the lazy swells of air, that now and then lifted themselves up from the forest, swept over the meadows, rustled the corn-leaves, whispered to the locust-trees, which skirted the yard, and then playing with the window drapery, passed on, and with the softest of fingers lifted gently their locks, and sunk to rest on their damp brows. These windows overlooked not only forest, meadow and corn-field, but in the perspective there was a glimpse of the village of A———, with its church-steeple overtopping the tallest trees, and appearing a common centre, around which the white houses were peeping through the foliage.

This might have been suggestive to Elder Clayton, for his eyes were fixed on it as he listened to a graphic sketch of his friend's labours since they last met.

"It has really been a refreshing season," said Brother Longwind, "a wonderful ingathering of souls this last winter. The Lord has been truly gracious to his people. Our churches are exceedingly prosperous wherever I have been." I would remark here in a pause of the speaker, as Elder Clayton fervently ejaculated, "Thank the Lord,"—that Father Longwind, as he was generally called, was a missionary employed by the association with which he was connected, to visit vacant fields, build up new churches, and to strengthen the weak. "I understand," he continued, "that the Lord has been here with a blessing, bringing numbers into the flock, not forgetting your own household—is it so, Brother Clayton?"

"It is true," replied Elder Clayton, "last Sabbath I baptized five, and there are others yet to come forward. A few perhaps are leaning towards the Methodists, but I think with a little looking after, they may all be brought along. By the way, have you any of our publications with you? I think if I had some works on Baptism and Communion, to pass round here, they would be just the thing."

"Have'nt got one with me—sorry—sold them all out! You've no idea what numbers of them I'm scattering round, as I go from one town to another. I just say, here's a good book, would'nt you like to buy? It is pleasantly written—cheap, too, only so much, and if you can't afford to buy it, I will give it to you; and the consequence is, of course, they take one or two, and sometimes a whole set. But, brother, I'm going to N—— to-morrow to get a new supply. These books are just what you want; I'll bring two or three sets on purpose for you, and I'll warrant that with them you'll bring all your charge around right. How is it with Anna? She was always quick and thoughtful. I used to think she was'nt far from the kingdom."

"Well, I don't know, I wish you would talk with her. Mother and I thought, of course, she would come out at our last Covenant Meeting. Mother even prepared her clothes for the water; but she said that she would rather wait; and now she has got a book which she is reading, that I don't approve of at all; indeed, I did'nt know anything about it till to-day."

"Ah! what is it?"

"I really don't know myself, some theological discussion, I should think, though she had just commenced reading as you came in."

"I don't approve of women and children meddling with such matters at all," said brother Longwind, with a long-drawn sigh, "they make such bad work of it always.—What can they know of the evidences pro and con, on questions which puzzle our wisest heads."

"You know," said brother Clayton, smiling, "it is given to the simplest of this world to confound the wise; and as to capacity for perceiving points at issue, Anna is not much inferior to the best. I would like to have you talk with her; you understand these things better than I do.—The difficulty with Anna is, she is never satisfied until she sounds to the bottom of everything that interests her—she must go to the bottom—to the very bottom of everything. Come, brother Longwind, let's walk down to the village; I have some calls to make to-day." Thus saying, the two set out leisurely down the way, enjoying the deep shade of the maples, which skirted either side along the road, stretching on far over the point of the hill; nor did they return till the sun had snatched a last burning kiss from the hill-tops, over which the clouds hung, and blushed crimson at the sight.

"I've got some glorious news for you," said George, bursting into the room where Anna was sitting, just at nightfall, with an open letter in his hand; "some glorious news for you, Anna! My college chum, Halley, is coming down to the 'Old Bird's Nest.'" I told him he'd better, for we were literally overflowing with milk and honey here, with an abundance of maple 'lasses, and also another kind, much sweeter and rarer, with green fields, trout brooks, and a trusty old musket also among our superfluities, besides other things too numerous to mention. And what's better yet, Anna, he's going to be here this very night."

"I think your friend will be welcome," said Anna with a quiet smile.

"Well, Anna, you are refreshingly cool, anyhow. But you see, you don't discover the beauties of it as I do. Halley is a glorious fellow, as cute as a lawyer and as deep as a sage. I've heard him argue on these theological questions, and tell you he can measure the length and breadth off them as well as anybody I ever saw. Why he talks like a preacher; in fact, I believe he is going to make one."

"Ah!" said Anna, her eye lighting up with interest, "perhaps we may get some information from him, then."

"Yes, that's it; and then you see I'll manage to put him against Father Longwind, and then we will have a treat."

"Would not that be unkind?" said Anna; "Perhaps Father Longwind would rather decline an argument."

"Never you fear that, Anna; he's always at it; and besides," said George, dropping his gay tone and smile, "I want to shield you from the attack. Don't I know what's a coming? I hav'nt lived in the world for nothing, I hope. But there comes the stage now, and as sure as I'm alive there's Halley too. An't he a splendid fellow?"

The person referred to jumped from the stage and walked with a quick step up the path, his eye wandering over the neatly arranged primroses, tulips, dahlias, &c., skirted with myrtle, violets and moss, and a fuschia that hung its wealth of crimson blossoms as a window drapery. All these were evidences of a delicate female taste, and his glance was one of warm appreciation.

He was received by his friend George with a hearty shake and a "How are you, my boy?" by Elder Clayton, with the warm salutation, "You are welcome, sir!" by Anna, with a blush and bow; while Father Longwind extended a glance, with his hand, that measured him, length and breadth, from his head downward. But soon they were equally interested in his easy flow of conversation and genial good spirits. It was late at night before the tide of conversation ebbed on the shore of silence, and they individually sought repose.

To be continued.

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