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CLARA CHILLINGTON; OR, THE PRIDE OF THE CLIFF.

A STORY OF ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

The following story is a faithful picture of the state of society on the Kentish Coast at the close of the last and the beginning of the present century. The various armistices and short truces with the French Republic or Empire gave great opportunities for the daring feats here chronicled of the Free Booters (smugglers), with whom the Romany (Gipsy) gangs were often in confederation. The old Martello Towers, as the quarters of the early Coast Guard (preventive) service and the ravines and caverns about Shorne Cliff could tell a story perfectly in keeping with the narrative, while the reckless character of the gentry of that period and locality, is not a whit overdrawn. The scenes about Dover and Folkestone, Calais and Gravelines, the classic ground of Romano-British and Norman-English history, are drawn to the very life, and no one either a native of, or visitor to, those places, can fail to recognize their identity. Although having no distinct historical or political complexion, but simply regarded as a social fiction, the author's pen has given us another "Waverley." We see almost the very homes and people with whom we were acquainted in our childhood, fifty or sixty years since, as the story goes on with unabated interest, under the skilful manipulation of the writer. In giving it to the public after careful revision, the only changes made are such as the more particular information and correct knowledge have suggested, and for which purpose the manuscript was placed in the hands of the

EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE.

"It'll be a rough night, Bob," said a coast guard at a telegraph station, situated on the cliff on the south-eastern coast of England. That telegraph was the semaphore of a hundred years ago, which told its tale to distant watchers by the movement of its arms. The person thus addressed was sitting by a blazing fire burning in the watch house, and wrapped in a number of heavy garments was awaiting the moment that should summon him forth to discharge his night duty as a patrol for preventing smuggling. Having therefore knocked the ashes from his pipe and refilled it preparatory to smoking it on his beat, as he heard the wind rattle against the shutters of the hut, he replied,

"You are right, Jack; and in my opinion it'll blow hard enough to send a fellow's teeth down his throat; nor will there be any chance to seek shelter, for old 'Luft' will be in his glory to-night, especially as he has heard that the Ransly gang intend running a cargo. I believe the old fellow to be a distant relation of Mother Carey's chicken, for there is no turning in with him when it blows hard."

"They'll never try to run a cargo through such a sea as will presently be raised."

"You wouldn't hold to that opinion long, if you knew the skipper of the *Nancy* as well as I do. It'll take a heavier sea than will be raised to-night to prevent Jack Pegden from coming over."

"Well, all I hope is that something will stop him, for I have no inclination to shoot any one to-night."

"Bah! shoot, indeed. If ever you try your hand with those fellows, take my advice and be very careful, or you may come out of the affray only second best. It is well enough to talk by the fire-side of what you will do, but if we have to attack them you'll find it to be no child's play."

"Ah! well, we shall see. Good-night, Bob."

"Good-night," was the response; and as he spoke the coast guard, swathed in his numerous garments, plunged into the darkness, and made his way along the cliff to the post. The wind by this time was blowing a fearful gale, and as the man bent his head before the blast, he puckered his lips as though fearful his own prediction would prove a correct one, and that the morning would find him bereft of the power to masticate his breakfast with any degree of pleasure.

The Ransly gang, whose presence was a matter for alarm with the men occupying that coast guard station, were a desperate set of ruffians led by a villain of that name, who defying all law and authority made it a business to convey contraband goods landed on the coast to a place of security; and this they did in opposition to the means employed to suppress the traffic, and very frequently after a pitched battle with the dragoons and coast guard who opposed them. Indeed the name of the Ransly gang was a terror to all who heard it; for there was no villainy they would hesitate to perform.

The wind whose violence had excited comment at the telegraph station, also whistled among the trees surrounding an old, but still substantial building, and known in that neighborhood by the name of the Priory; and as it howled around the dwelling, and rattled the leaden casements, even the obdurate heart of Sir Harry Chillington became subject to unpleasant sensations. Pacing the floor of what he from courtesy chose to term a library, the fury of the tempest awoke within him thoughts unfriendly. His manner was that of an iron soul struggling hard to eject feelings unhappy, which without being courted had quartered themselves on him. Increasing the speed with which he now wildly paraded that apartment, and sinking into a reverie, he clenched his fist and compressed his lips as though in defiance of some form fancy had created within his brain. The feelings of Sir Harry were becoming excited beyond control, when a knock at the door from without aroused him.

"Come in!" he sharply exclaimed, being glad that something had occurred to break the chain of thought which was fast binding him in feelings of horror. In obedience to his command the door opened, and a servant entered bearing a note that had just been left at the Priory. Eagerly seizing the paper, and casting a glance at the superscription, Sir Harry enquired:

"By whom was this note delivered?"

"Mad Tom has this moment left it, Sir Harry," was the response.

The baronet broke the seal, and as he read its contents his brow became corrugated, and such ferocity overspread his countenance as to make him a frightful person to look upon. But a sudden relaxation of the stern rigidity of his aspect quickly followed and a grim smile sat upon his lip, apparently the offspring of a fresh thought which had flashed across his brain. Being temporarily relieved from the incubus that had before been crushing him, he took the handle of the bell and pulled it vigorously.

In reply to the enquiry of his servant, Sir Harry ordered that his favourite horse should at once be prepared for a journey. Bowing obedience to the command, the servant retired to give the necessary instructions, and quickly returned with the riding-coat and boots of the baronet. Being equipped for a ride on such a tempestuous night, he stood impatiently awaiting the announcement that all was in readiness.

It was not an unusual thing for Sir Harry to be out late at night, nor indeed at any hour, as his habits were eccentric, and his unamiable disposition rendered the remotest hint at the cause of his absence perilous. Having therefore mounted a roan, which appeared proud of being called on to discharge a duty in the midst of such a wild storm as was still raging, he dashed off into the darkness of night, and took the direction of the cliff road leading to the old town and port of Dover.

The storm maintained its violence as the baronet pursued his journey; the rain still fell pitilessly; and as the angry gale came booming across the seething waters it moaned as being the death knell of many a gallant sailor. But the hardy form of that horseman was proof against its fury, and he passed through it as fearlessly as though himself were the Storm King.

The road taken by Sir Harry in this night ride, led him toward the telegraph station on the cliff; and as he approached the place the clatter of his horse's hoofs upon the flinty road aroused the fears of the coast guard within. That boaster of an hour before, as he heard the sound, felt his courage retreat to his extremities, and as though it were in their weakness entreating his legs to convey him to a place of security from the terrible Ransly gang, whom he believed were now about to attack the station. Sinking into a corner the King's man held his breath from very fear, nor was it until the sound had died away that he ventured to peep out at the door, and again in the absence of all danger to feel that he was a courageous man.

Ignorant of the state of perturbation into which he had thrown the mind of the coast guard, Sir Harry Chillington rode on, and disregarding the challenge of the horse patrol whom he met, and who turned in his saddle with a superstitious awe to look after him as though he were a phantom rider, he pushed his way onward at full speed toward the town he had now nearly reached. Passing the battery that guards that old cinque port on the west, he traversed the dark and crooked streets, until he at length drew rein in an obscure passage bearing the somewhat unique name of Live Post Lane.

Having dismounted he entered into a dingy-looking shop, over the door of which hung a weather-beaten lamp, casting a lurid light on to

the surrounding darkness. That sign showed the house to be the abode of an apothecary. Obeying the signal of the presence of the baronet in the tinkling of a small bell, the dispenser of drugs, a man tall, pale, cadaverous, whose skin, from being hunger pinched, had become too loose for his frame and hung in wrinkles, made his appearance. A short conversation followed, which at first lighted up the countenance of the apothecary with pleasure, but was quickly succeeded by the shadow of apprehension. These expressions of mingled feeling told of a conflict going on in his mind, and it was not until Sir Harry had talked for a long time that quiet was restored, and the aspect of heroic resolve settled itself on his features. Offering to the baronet a broken chair as a seat, the man then quickly disappeared in the rear of his little shop.

On leaving Sir Harry, the apothecary entered into a little back yard, and made his way toward a dilapidated kitchen forming the stable for a miserable hack which business compelled him to maintain as best he could.

"Come, Bones," said he, as he entered the apartment occupied by the wretched brute; "there is before you the prospect of a better feed than any you have had since we became acquainted; but like me, you will have to plunge through the tempest of this dreadful night to earn it." "Bones," as the apothecary, in the wit that springs up in some minds even from extreme misery, had chosen to call his hack, on hearing his master's voice turned his head toward him as much as to say, "I understand you, and it is a good deal that I will dare for the pleasure of again tasting a feed of corn." The appearance of "Bones," was that of having been fed upon daylight, and until the ethereal diet had rendered him almost transparent. He was a most melancholy-looking horse, that from constant hunger had grown tired of life, and yet had not sufficient courage to put an end to his existence by refusing to live any longer. Picking up an impure cabbage leaf which had fallen beyond the reach of the creature, the last of a handful that had been given to "Bones" by a neighbouring green-grocer, the apothecary offered it to try him as he unfasted the string that formed his only halter.

"That's it," said he, as having placed the saddle on his back, he bade "Bones" grope his way in the dark through the house from the kitchen to the street. As therefore the wretched creature felt the gushing wind, and heard the rain still pouring, he hesitated. There was indecision in the manner of the horse, which seemed to say, "This threatens to be a rougher affair than I thought, and I am doubtful about entering on it." But either recollecting the luxury of the promised feed of corn, or wisely remembering the cudgelings with the broomstick he was subject to when at all refractory, he slowly, and with the utmost caution, picked his way into the street.

Having made ready his horse, the apothecary fetched from his slender wardrobe such garments as seemed best adapted to resist the force of the storm, and left the shop in company with Sir Harry. Being mounted they both pursued their way along the ill-lighted streets of the old town, the baronet being compelled to hold in with a tight rein his fiery steed whose mettle was thoroughly aroused by its previous run, that it might accommodate its pace to the travelling capabilities of its slower friend.

Being seldom called on to make night visits beyond the limits of the town, the fears of the apothecary increased as the habitations of men became fewer, and were still augmented when he found himself alone with the baronet in the wild country. Tenaciously the man of drugs held on to the wretched beast which carried him, as though apprehensive of being swept from his back by the fury of the gale, or of being carried away horse and all no one might tell whither by some treacherous foe. Penury and wretchedness had for years been the lot of that man, and it was a large bribe that had been offered to tempt him on such a night, and to such a distance from his home.

Having pursued their way for some time along the public road, the horsemen turned off into a country lane, leading toward a corner of the Priory estate, where stood a red brick building, bearing the name of Bromly House. Why that residence should bear such a name does not appear, but this is the appellation the old place still wears. The road they had newly entered on, from being but little used, gave license to the brambles forming the hedgerows to stretch their briary arms across the path, and this in turn became a source of alarm to the apothecary. Repeatedly did those fugitives hook their pointed fingers into some portion of his person, or apparel, and as often as they did so, would he regret his temerity in venturing forth at such an hour, and feel willing to sacrifice the reward, could he but be planted again safe and sound in Live Post Lane. But it was now too late to retreat, and there remained nothing for him but to yield himself the strange and mysterious fate which had brought him thither.

At length Bromly House was reached; and on passing through the doorway the sight that presented itself was far from relieving his fears. Stretched on a low bed, with but slender covering, and apparently in the last stage of consumption, lay a woman whose age was scarcely forty years, and whose appearance still indicated that she had once been beautiful. A cursory glance told that her dissolution was fast approaching, and that the consciousness of this fact was settled on her mind. On seeing Sir

Harry and the apothecary enter the room, the dying woman fainted.

"She is gone," said the baronet, addressing his companion, as he looked upon the pallid cheek and bloodless lips of the sufferer.

"I think not," he replied, as he placed his skinny fingers on the woman's pulse. "She has fainted; a restorative will bring her back to consciousness."

Having drawn forth from his pocket a small phial containing a subtle remedy whose powers could release from a state of lethargy suspended animation, he applied it to the nostrils of the apparently lifeless woman, and as her feeble inspiration gently inhaled the spirit, she awoke as from a delicious dream.

"I thought it to be all over!" she sighed; "but I have yet to pass through it. O death!"

"Take this draught," said the apothecary, who had mixed with water from a jug resting on a chair a few drops of a stimulant he had brought with him, and holding a broken cup to the mouth of the patient she drank the contents. The remedy thus applied produced an immediate effect on her enfeebled frame, and her countenance became more animated, and her intellect more lucid.

Sir Harry saw the change produced in the patient, and hated the sight. Inwardly he cursed the apothecary for his folly, and but that he knew the effect would be only transient he would have kicked him forth into the darkness. Yet short as was the resuscitation it proved too long to be agreeable to his feelings.

On becoming fully conscious who were the persons present in the room with her, the dying woman beckoned Sir Harry to her bedside. He beheld the mute request, and would gladly have been spirited away a thousand miles from that room; he dreaded the interview that he could not now avoid; and had it not been that with all his boasting he was at heart a coward, he would have mixed with his own hand a potion that would have sealed in the silence of death the lips of the sufferer. It was not virtue that restrained him from sending the invalid into the domain of Death a few moments earlier than disease would have conveyed her thither: he dreaded the consequences that might follow such an act, and this alone prevented the deed. There being no excuse for refusing to approach the dying woman, he reluctantly yielded to her request.

Commanding the apothecary to retire to the other end of the room, the baronet drew near to the invalid. Taking his hand in her own, the dying woman pressed it with all the fervor her remaining strength could command. But had a viper stung him he could not have felt more frightened than he did when touched by the delicate fingers of the mother of Mad Tom. What was there in the touch of that delicate hand to cause such an unpleasant feeling? He had once caressed that very hand which now made him start in terror. Did there travel along that almost bloodless arm a pulsation that could move a soul so encased in sensuality as to be past feeling; and revive within it recollections that it was hoped had faded for ever? Something in that touch made Sir Harry shrink; and as the almost voiceless tongue of the dying woman whispered words unknown to any but themselves, the colour faded from his cheek, and for the first time in many years he trembled. Earnestly the woman spoke; and as with an imploring look she uttered her last appeal, she pointed with her attenuated finger to Mad Tom. It was evident from her manner that she was pleading for the idiot boy she was leaving behind.

"I will," was all that Sir Harry was heard to say in response to her appeal.

Having obeyed his employer in removing from the bedside of the invalid, the apothecary peered through the window pane into the surrounding darkness. The tempest still raged; and as he listened to its roar his fears became intensified, and his thoughts flew back to those he had left at home, to be followed by the wish that he was again within his little shop. Never famous for courage, the years of struggling poverty he had endured, although sharpening his wits, had robbed him of that hopeful manliness of feeling essential to happiness, in taxing his nerves to their utmost tension under the apprehension that some calamity might suddenly overwhelm him on account of his distressed condition. This feeling was now haunting him; and he started as a low moan from the lips of Sir Harry fell upon his ear. Turning at the sound, he beheld the baronet bending over that body, whose soul already poised on the wing of immortality was now longing for release. In eagerness to escape, that soul seemed to be tugging at the thread of life attenuated and torn by the attrition of sorrow, that it might snap it and enter eternal freedom. It at length succeeded in its effort; and as the spirit floated away it cast on to the countenance still turned toward its oppressor, a look of forgiveness.

Being assured that the vital spark was at length extinguished, the baronet called his companion to him. There was a trembling in his voice as he did so; but startled at the expression of his heart's feeling, as it became manifest in articulation, he quickly resumed his accustomed sternness.

"She is gone this time," he said, assuming the tone of an unnatural levity, that struck a deeper horror into the heart of the apothecary.

"She is gone," he replied, as he laid his finger on the place where the feeble pulse had so lately palpitated, but from which it had now flown for ever. "She is gone," he whispered, but in a