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CLARA LESLIE.

A TALE OF OUR OWN TIMES.

CHAPTER XXII.—OUR LAST DISCUSSION.

"Days of darkness! Idols sainted, Legends, fables, witches, spells! Fires by mockish fancy painted, Abject fears, and dismal cells!"

Anonymous.

That day was not to end without a new incident. During the afternoon a carriage drove up to the door, and in a moment Catherine was in the hall to welcome Douglas, who had come to see how Clara was getting on.

"Do not the doctors recommend change of air?" asked he, turning to Catherine, after the first salutations and inquiries were over.

"As soon as she is able to travel," replied Catherine; "of course the sooner she leaves a place where the cholera still exists, the better."

Douglas looked perplexed, and began to walk the room. It was evident affection for his sister was struggling with his pride. He did not like bringing her back to London without a promise not to confess. Clara watched him for a few moments.

"Douglas," said she, at last, "you need not be afraid to take me back to London. I wish to see Mr. Wingfield once more, but after that I am quite ready to give you the promise you wanted me to give you in the winter, before I left London."

Douglas turned keenly round, and looked her full in the face. He met her full calm eye fixed upon him, and his countenance brightened.

"I am very glad to hear you say so, Clara," he replied; "I am very glad your illness seems to have changed you so much."

"I am changed," she answered; "but, Douglas, I would not deceive you for one moment. I am not changed as you would have me changed, notwithstanding my willingness to give you the promise you required of me."

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean, Clara? You speak enigmas."

"There was a moment's pause; she passed her hand over her eyes, and then replied, 'I am quite convinced of the inconsistency of my position in the Church of England.'"

"You are, at last, are you?" said Douglas.

"I would that many others were so, likewise."

"I have thought of it many months," proceeded Clara; "I have read much, and I have prayed earnestly to be guided aright; and now, Douglas, my mind is quite made up—nothing can alter my resolution; I too must be a Catholic!"

She had summoned all her courage to make this confession, and now she sank on the sofa, supported by pillows, her pale cheek again deepening into the bright pink of excitement, and looking full into her brother's agitated features with that calm look of firm yet perfectly gentle determination which he knew full well. He looked at her for a moment or two, then paced the room in silence.

"Clara," said he, at last, "in December you are of age, and your fortune is your own; till then you are under my authority. You know no apostate shall ever cross the threshold of my door. I cut your brother Alan four years ago, when he chose to renounce, as you say you are going to do, the home and the religion of his fathers; and I will do the same to you. I do not know what you mean by saying you are ready to give me the promise I required of you in the winter, with such a determination as you have expressed."

"I mean what I have said," replied Clara. "Of course, when I am of age, my promise will no longer be binding. Douglas, what can I do to prove to you that this is no girlish freak, no childish fancy? I would not leave your roof in anger,—for leave it I know I must the moment I am a Catholic. Six full months must elapse before I am of age. I am willing, for your sake, and the sake of those who have guided me hitherto, to wait patiently that time to see whether the convictions are really the work of God. At the end of that time, Douglas, if I think as I do now—if I still believe firmly as I now do, that I shall remain in the Anglican Church at the peril of my soul,—you cannot then say that I have acted hastily, and with no regard to the feelings of those around me. During that time, of course I should not be going to confession to Mr. Wingfield, or any one else; and therefore I suppose you have no objection to let me remain in London."

Douglas again paced the room in silence, then said sarcastically, "I suppose Alan is in full possession of your state of mind? You have taken good care to inform him?"

"I have never written to him," replied Clara, "since I gave my promise that I would not. I have held that promise sacred."

"And where do you intend to go when you are by law emancipated from my control?" said Douglas; "for you seem only to wait for that."

"I know not," replied Clara, gently but sadly.

"God has led me hitherto, step by step, I need not look forward; He will provide some home for me when He calls upon me to leave those who are my natural protectors and guardians.—He knows I am ready to follow wherever He wills."

"I think the most disgusting part of the whole affair," said Douglas contemptuously, "is this intense self-deceit of yours, Clara. You pretend you are following the will of God, and making great sacrifices for Him, when every one but yourself must see it is simply your own self-will that is guiding you. Ever since you have been born, you have had your own way. You would fast, and make yourself ill; you would make yourself ridiculous by your dress and behaviour; you would spend whole days in church; and at last you would fly in my face, and commence that disgusting system of confession. And because I thwarted you in this one thing, you did it clandestinely; you braved my authority. And now that you think I shall no longer be able to force you to behave yourself like any one else; you are going leave my house, and apostatize from the faith you were brought up in, the more easily to follow the freaks of your self-will. But you will rue it; ten years hence, when all these excited imaginations are come in to their level, you will bitterly lament the day when you scorned the friends of your youth, and trusted yourself into the hands of strangers. And all this, forsooth, is following the will of God; and we have texts quoted to us about loving father and mother more than God; and you imagine you are a martyr, and persecuted for your religion, when there never was a better exemplification of that old saying you used to quote, 'Do not knock your head against a post, and call it persecution.' The Bible says that women are to be 'keepers at home, to take care of the house, and to learn in silence and humility, instead of running about from house to house as you do, dictating and judging on matters of faith, and neglecting every home-duty of God has given you.'"

Clara hid her face in her hands, and a few burning tears made their way between the small thin fingers.

"It is a little hard," said she at last; "but Alan bore it too, and why should I repine? I know not what he suffered."

"And what grounds have you," proceeded Douglas, "for thus deserting the Church of your forefathers? What is there to attract you in that mass of superstition and rubbish that Popery presents to her credulous worshippers? How can you bend your reason to believe that our Saviour is shut up in a little box in every church in Christendom?"

"Douglas! Douglas!" exclaimed Clara, shuddering, "do not speak so."

"How can you lower His glorious Godhead, into being at the beck, and carried about and touched by every dirty vagabond priest that chooses to invoke Him?"

"O Douglas!" exclaimed Clara; "and when in the days of His flesh He allowed every dirty vagabond Jew not only to approach, but to spit upon and buffet that Sacred Form, to trail it in the mud, and scourge it up that dreadful bill of Cavalry! But it is even so, Douglas; our Lord abuses Himself even to be, as you call it, 'shut up in a little box.' He hath made Himself even 'bread' for us; and in that Tabernacle where He deigns to abide for ever to listen to the supplications of His faithful people, He is as really and truly present as when the beloved disciple leaned on His tender breast at supper, and the Magdajene wiped His sacred Feet with her hair."

"Well, you will swallow anything, when you can believe that grossest of all the idolatries of that apostate Church," said Douglas. "It is contrary to common sense. How can you eat the real flesh and bones of the son of God? Clara, it revolts one even to think of it!"

"Ab, Douglas!" replied Clara, in a voice of sorrow, "that question has been asked long ere this; 'How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?' and they that asked it were offended, and turned back from following Him, because the saying was too hard for them. The spirit of Protestantism was at work even in our Lord's own days."

Douglas turned away; he was struck, but he would not acknowledge it, and, like the general-ty of Protestants, he put aside the home-thrust by another attack.

"At any rate, you cannot prove the arrogant pretensions of the Pope from Scripture," said he.

"And how else can you interpret that text.—'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will found my Church?' replied Clara. 'As to me, I have till now always simply passed it over as inexplicable.'"

"First of all, it cannot be proved that St. Peter ever was at Rome," said Douglas.

"O Douglas!" exclaimed Clara, "you might as well say Julius Cæsar had never been there. Who but the most ultra bigot ever disputed that fact?"

"But supposing it was so, what has that text to do with St. Peter's successors?" returned Douglas.

"The gates of hell shall never prevail against it," replied Clara. "Remember, it reads in the Syriac, the language in which our Lord spoke, exactly as in French, 'Tu est Pierre, et sur cette pierre je fonderai Mon Eglise.'—'Thou art Peter, and on this Peter I will found My Church,'—not as it is in the Latin and Greek."

"They have crammed you well," said Douglas bitterly.

Clara had almost lost her temper at this speech; but a look from Catherine, who was sitting quietly by during this scene, made her recollect herself, and she was silent.

"It is such an inconsistency," continued Douglas, "to talk of the sin of private judgment; and then these very men make you take the most awful step in the world on that very private responsibility. Why, the very entering the Church of Rome is the greatest act of private judgment you can imagine."

"It is," replied Clara; "but it will be the last. Is the poor blind man to go on forever erring on his private judgment, because he fears the one bold step that will place him beside a guide? 'It our forefathers had not, three hundred years ago, asserted the right of private judgment, and left the Church, ah! I should not have been obliged to take all this trouble to go back whence they came. It puts me in mind of that German convert who was so tartly told by his prince that 'he did not like people who changed their religion.' 'Nor I either,' he replied; 'if my forefathers had not changed theirs, I should not have been obliged to change mine.' Indeed, Douglas, you ought to allow the same liberty of conscience to every one, in all consistency, that you assert so strongly for yourselves."

"You are free, Clara," replied Douglas, coldly, "no one will burn you. We leave the task of burning heretics to the Church of Rome. Those are her tender mercies and compassions."

"And are Protestants quite free from the stain of persecution, Douglas?" said Clara, earnestly but gently. "How many hundred years have the penal laws disgraced the English code? How short a time ago is it since it was high treason for a Catholic priest to say Mass in this free and so-called liberal island? When was it that with closed doors and trembling hearts the people stole in secret to receive the Bread of Life, or paid a thousand pounds each time for the precious boon, like that noble lord we read of? Who was it that hunted the fanatic Croyenater through the woods like a beast of prey? Who put down, by force and sword, meeting and conventicle in camp and field? Who, in the days of Charles the II., had hundreds of innocent Catholics put to death on the sole testimony of a false knave? And Ireland—poor Ireland! she continued, kindling till her heart beat, and she felt the rising emotion almost too much for her. "Who has dealt that hard, hard measure to her warm-hearted children of faith? Who has striven these three hundred years to force upon them a hated creed? Driven their nobility into exile and want? Given their possessions to their Protestant usurpers? Endowed that false creed with all the rich charities wherewith an age of faith had decked the altars of Christ's Immaculate Spouse? Who drove her priests into beggary, and even denied her children the poor alternative of exile to get that education which they then pointed the finger of scorn at them for not obtaining, because they preferred the one treasure of their ancient faith even to the coveted boon of knowledge, when given by the stranger's hand, and tamed with the stranger's creed? Who did all this? Was it Catholics? No; it was England—Protestant England, in all the falsely boasted glory of her private judgment and liberty of conscience. And, Douglas, if the stain of persecution is on the Church of Rome, let the Church of England pause ere she fling the accusation in her face; for terrible indeed will be the cry that rises against her in that hour of retribution."

There was a smile on Catherine's features as Clara paused, quite astonished herself at the burst her excited feelings had drawn forth from her. How often had Clara used this natural eloquence in behalf of false systems, and heroes full of faults, whom she deemed spotless mirrors of perfection! and how gladly did Catherine see the ardent mind led at last into the pasture where she could roam at will and not fear to rove!—Douglas was coldly stern.

"You will not make black white, Clara," said he. "I have no doubt you will take your own way, as you have always done, unless these six months make you see to what a precipice your self-will is leading you. You will open your eyes when it is too late, and find yourself on the brink of eternal ruin. Clara, I fear for you,—for your eternal salvation. It is my duty to warn you, useless as I know the warning to be; and then I think the more we avoid the

subject during the time you remain with us the better. I have no objection to taking you back to London—change of air will be good for your health; and perhaps these excited imaginations may be dispersed in time to save you from this willfulness. At any rate, let us never mention the subject again. You will see Mr. Wingfield once, as you wished—when and where you please; and then let us hope you will conduct yourself during the time that remains as you know I wish persons living in my house to act."

He left the room. Clara could not answer; his manner cut short everything. She looked up at Catherine as he closed the door. She saw in one glance how deeply she sympathized with her wounded feelings; and as Catherine put out her arms towards her, she threw herself into them and wept without restraint. Oh, what is more bitter than this continual misunderstanding! To feel that those with whom one lived cannot comprehend the hidden springs of one's actions, and attribute to self-love and self-will what may perhaps have cost an almost heroic effort, and be done on the purest motive of pleasing God alone! Clara's mind was like Alan's in this;—it broke it, it wore it down; it was the bitterest draught in her cup of sorrow; but she felt it was the peculiar portion of the convert, and took it from God's hand willingly, and drank it off to the bottom, asking Him to give her more, if it were His Blessed Will. Catherine knew she did not wish to be talked to; she knew without her telling her what the long sigh meant that seemed to stop the course of her tears, and with Catholic faith she invoked the aid of the Queen of Sorrows, the Mother of Mercy, whom Clara scarcely yet ventured to call upon in her hour of need.—She then gently, as it were, led her thoughts to those moments when she kept within herself the secret that God had confided to her, and bore the suspicions of her holy spouse St. Joseph, till God Himself interfered by a miracle in behalf of her who confided her all into His Hands, and trusted Him so entirely and lovingly. Clara listened, and was soothed; it was one more step towards the Catholic love of Christ's Immaculate Mother.

CHAPTER XXIII.—THE FAREWELL TO ANGLICANISM.

"Stay with us, Jesus, when the smile Of joy doth all our steps beguile; Stay with us, Jesus, when we weep. With Thee on Calvary's mountain steep; And silent, silent, soft and slow, With streams of love our hearts o'erflow, And in its waters pure and deep Our wearied souls and senses steep." Little Snowdrop.

There was little now to keep the party at the Lodge any longer at Ashton. Every one kept every one else in quarantine; so there were no farewell visits, and two days after Douglas arrived, it was thought safe for Clara to move.—They reached London that evening, and Clara was once more domiciled in Osnaburgh Terrace. She had not heard from Mr. Wingfield since the letter in which she had recalled her promise, and she looked forward with nervous dread to her last interview with him. For the first time she had gone to spend the day with Catherine Temple, and still weak, was lying upon the sofa in her drawing-room, when he suddenly walked into the room. He looked surprised at seeing her, and still more at her altered appearance. As to poor Clara, she turned deadly pale, then felt the colour rush in burning floods to her cheek. She attempted to rise, but felt powerless, and with her eyes fixed on her lap, sat like a culprit awaiting his doom. He saw her agitation, and inquired, with an air of concern, after her health.

"I have had the cholera," replied Clara, venturing one glance into his face.

His eyes were fixed upon her; but he turned suddenly away the moment he perceived that she saw it.

There were a few more sentences of this kind, and then Clara, summoning all her courage as she saw he was preparing to go, said, in a faltering voice, "I wished to speak to you."

He sighed deeply, but instantly returned.

"Did you receive a letter from me about a month ago?"

"You mean your last one from Ashton?" he replied. "I did not answer it because I thought you did not wish an answer."

Clara hid her face in her hands; she prayed earnestly, and strength was given; a sudden calm filled her mind, and she said, in a low, calm voice, as she put down her hands from her face.

"I wish to tell you that I have at last come to a determination. I do not think I can any longer doubt what the Will of God is. I do no longer doubt. My wavering and hesitation are changed into a full conviction that I cannot remain in the Church of England without periling my soul's salvation. There is but one Church of Christ, and that one Church is the Church of Rome."

"How long is it since this conviction came upon you?" said Mr. Wingfield.

"It grew gradually stronger since I allowed myself to think," replied Clara; "and for the last ten days I seem to have needed no more controversy. It is a settled calm conviction, that nothing seems to have power to shake, and that appears like the growth of years instead of one day. My mind seems to have received a new element, to be at last at anchor. God has given us a new gift that it had not before, and something tells me that this gift is faith."

"And are you going to take a step which may endanger your soul's salvation upon the strength of the feelings of a few days, Clara?" said Mr. Wingfield.

"O dearest Father!" said Clara, "what can I do to prove to you that these are not mere feelings?"

"Wait—wait patiently, and try them," replied Mr. Wingfield.

"I am ready," replied Clara. "How long do you require?"

"Six months," said Mr. Wingfield; "meantime there must be no going to Mass, no writing to your brother, no communication with Roman Catholics, no reading of any sort of controversy, no talking with Roman priests, no using of Roman devotions. Will these feelings stand such a trial as this?" he continued, turning, and fixing a look of incredulous inquiry upon her.

He did not expect the calm look and gentle firmness with which she answered.

"Yes, sir, they will; for they are the work of God."

He turned away; her manner puzzled him, and he saw there was no more hope. She then told him the arrangements she had made with her brother, and on what conditions she had come to London.

He sighed heavily, played with a book that lay near, turned over a few pages, then coldly rose, and gave her his hand, to depart. She could not part thus coldly, and half rose as she placed her hand in his, and, with a look that spoke more than words, turned away and burst into tears.—He seemed touched. She felt that he lingered; but he said nothing.

"Could you but believe what anguish it is to pain you," said she, in a broken voice.

"Why do you leave us, then?" said he. "You think to find among Roman Catholics what you do not find among us,—more care, more individual guidance, more sympathy. There are those who have thought like you, and found themselves mistaken; and then in a strange land they have sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept and mourned over their lost heritage when it was too late. Once there, you cannot return. The leap is easily taken. Beforehand it seems nothing, but when it is once done, it is like the enchanted castle; the iron-gates close behind you, and there is no return. You are leaving a system, tried, known, and loved, for one at best unknown and untried."

"It is indeed an act of faith," murmured poor Clara.

"And what will be your feelings when you do not find what you have sought answer your expectations?" proceeded Mr. Wingfield. "Do you believe that Mr. Newman is content? I have read that book 'Loss and Gain' over and over again, and to me there is a spirit of unsatisfied yearning after what he has left running through the whole book."

Clara looked up in utter astonishment. "Unsatisfied yearning after what he has left!" repeated she; "and the last chapter—that beautiful description of Charles's reception,—is that too unsatisfied? Have you read his last volume of Sermons?"

"No, I have not," replied Mr. Wingfield coldly; "but depend upon it what I say is true,—it cannot be otherwise. No one can leave a system like ours, where all that is Catholic is so fully developed, and not feel sooner or later the sin of the step he has taken. In a very short time you will be as restless and full of doubt as ever, when the devil has once persuaded you to take the irrevocable step. Till then he will lull you by a false peace, and promises of complete rest and tranquillity beyond the forbidden ground."

Clara was then silent. It all sounded very fair and reasonable, and it would have been difficult to say what turn the conversation would have taken, had not the footman at this moment thinking his mistress was within, thrown open the door for another visitor.

We will not attempt to say how the colour rushed to Clara's cheek, or how Mr. Wingfield looked in displeased surprise at the agitated manner in which she welcomed the new comer.

Father Raymond, for it was he himself, bowed with marked courtesy to Mr. Wingfield, and then smilingly claimed him as an old acquaintance.

"I see you do not recognise me," and he, half sadly. "I was a very young man when you left Oxford. Do you remember Herbert de Grey?"