

Literature, &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

From the London Working Man's Friend.
CLARA GREGORY: OR THE STEPMOTHER.
A Story in ten Chapters.

As she sat at the window, reading, the next morning, the trampling of horses in the courtyard attracted her notice.

There sat Clara on her horse, Brentford encouraging her graceful timidity, and caressing the fiery animal on which she was mounted. Another moment and he, too, vaulted into the saddle, and away! Nobody knew better than Brentford that he looked nowhere so well as on a horse, and understood nothing so well as horsemanship. Mrs Gregory admired them all, riders and horses, as they passed, looking so elegant, so excited, and so happy.

'Perhaps she did not observe my note,' thought she.

'Do they not look beautiful!' cried Alice, entering at that moment; 'Clara's riding-dress is so becoming to her perfect form. She sits like a queen. And then Brentford—I hardly know which to admire, him, or his horse—and that is saying a great deal.'

'Your comparison is very apt, Alice,' said her mother, laughing; 'for Mr Brentford's beauty is very much of the same character as that of the noble brute he bestrides. They certainly are both extremely handsome.'

'Well, I wouldn't care if he were as ugly as Caliban, if I could only ride his magnificent gray. Oh! if I were only old enough to be invited. But I must to my quadratic equations! Oh, I had forgotten—this note Clara left for you.'

Mrs Gregory hastily opened it, and read thus:

'Clara's father is not in the habit of troubling himself with the inspection her affairs; and Mrs Gregory is entreated not to burden her mind with any undue solicitude.'

C. L. GREGORY.

The tears sprang to the mother's eyes as she read these lines; but she brushed them away, for she heard footsteps at her door. It opened, and there stood Dr Gregory himself. A right joyous meeting was there.

'And where are the children?' he asked.

'Alice left me but a moment ago, Neddie is in the garden, at play, I believe, and Clara has gone to ride.'

'To ride?'—With whom?

'With Mr Brentford, a young man who came to town about the time you left, and has become somewhat intimate here. I should like to have you make his acquaintance.'

'Why, what is he?'

'You will see for yourself,' answered his wife, with a smile. 'But you have told me nothing about your poor sister yet.'

It was not long before Dr Gregory had an opportunity of meeting the stranger, and holding a long conversation with him in his own house.

'That is the man you spoke of!' said he abruptly to his wife, as the door closed on the visitor.

She assented.

'A man, indeed, if hair and cloth can make one. It is a pity he hadn't a brain inside his comely cranium.'

Clara flashed a vengeful glance on her stepmother, as the doctor thus characteristically uttered himself, and sailed majestically out of the room.

CHAPTER VII.

The last rays of a June sun were streaming into Clara's chamber through the open window at which she sat.

'There goes father into his office!' she exclaimed. 'He is alone. Now or never! and snatching her sun-bonnet, she ran quickly down the stairs and across the garden to the little white vine-covered office that stood at its foot. A moment's hesitation, as she laid her hand on the latch, and then, with a sudden air of resolution, she opened the door and went in. Her father, who sat at the window, reading, glanced at her as she entered, nodded slightly and went on with his book.

Clara walked across the floor to the library, and searched it diligently. Yet her father did not ask her what she wanted. She rattled gently the bones of a skeleton that hung in the corner. Still he did not look up. She played a tattoo on the skull of a Hottentot. The imperturbable doctor moved not. So she went up to him, and laid her hand on the back of his chair, saying,

'Have you a few minutes for me, father?'

'Oh yes, my dear. Can you wait till I finish this article?' So she leaned against his chair, gazing out of the window, and wishing herself back in her room.

'Well, Clara, I am ready for you,' said her father at last, closing his book.

But she seemed to have nothing ready to say, and began to pull to pieces a stray branch of woodbine that looked in at the window.

'Why, what is it, my child—do you want a new frock, or what?'

'No, sir. I want—I came to ask you—why the truth is, father, that I want to be married, and beg you to tell me yes, when I ask you if I may.'

'Want to be married!' cried the doctor, laughing immoderately. 'Now I protest, of all the fooleries, that is the last I should have thought of the child's asking for! Why, see here, dear—how long is it since you were romping about here, in short dresses, and short hair, and all that? Want to be married?' and he gazed at her with an incredulous smile.

'I am nearly seventeen,' observed Clara, with considerable dignity.

'Oh, indeed! I beg your pardon, madam!' exclaimed her father, in a tone of profound deference, at the same time seating her on his knee. 'You want to be married. Now, what for, my little lady?'

'Why, I think, without it, neither I nor one other can ever be happy.'

'And who might that other individual be?'

'I dare not tell you, for you are prejudiced against him, and will refuse me.'

'Prejudiced, am I? What, do you opine, has prejudiced me?'

'I think you adopted the opinions of another before seeing him, and were not prepared to judge justly.'

'It is this Brentford you mean?'

'Yes sir,' replied the girl, colouring deeply, and turning away her head.

'And what do you suppose would make your happiness with him?'

'Why, he is so noble, so generous, so honorable.'

'Are you quite sure that is it, Clara? Or is it that he is so handsome, so genteel, so elegantly bearded, so devoted to you? But I will not keep you on the rack, my poor child. I will tell you at once, that it is not my wish that you should marry mortal men, be he who he may, till you come to years of discretion, which is not likely to be for four or five yet.'

'You do not know, now, what you will want when your taste is fully formed, your character consolidated. I am convinced that this man who now captivates you so much, possesses none, or next to none, of the qualities necessary to secure your permanent happiness elevation in the connexion you desire. He is far from being the person to whose influence I should be willing to have you subject your whole future life. And, indeed, if he met my entire approval, I should be very reluctant to have you pledge yourself so young.'

'Be not in haste to assume the cares and responsibilities of life, my dear child; they will come soon enough at fullest. I would have you a strong, tight minded, well developed woman, before you take the station and duties of a woman. I would not suffer you to marry now, unless I were willing to risk the peace of your whole life, which I am far enough from being.' And he drew down her blushing cheek, and kissed it.

'Do you not suppose your lover would find another lady as much to his taste, should you reject him?'

'Never!' replied Clara, emphatically; 'he has told me a hundred times that he never loved before, and he never should again.'

'Very well,' returned her father, with a quiet smile, 'if he will give you bail for his re-appearance here, four years from this day, I shall be ready to listen to his proposals if I am alive. But why did he not proffer his suit himself, like a man, instead of pilfering your heart, and then sending you, poor, quailing thing, to ask the powers if he might have it! A heavy frown lowered on Dr Gregory's brow, which his daughter hastened to dissipate saying,—

'Indeed, he would have seen you, but I preferred to, because—'

'Because what?'

'I thought you would be more willing to listen to me.'

'I hope I should be reasonable with any one. You understand my wishes, Clara, and no doubt, I may depend on your acquiescence in them. You need not trouble yourself any further about a marriage, till you are of age, at least. As to Mr Brentford, I rely on your judgement and sense of propriety my daughter, to direct your future conduct. Of course, you will discontinue any intimate friendship with him.'

'I am heartily sorry to disappoint you, love, but I have not a doubt you will be infinitely happier in the end.'

Clara's lip quivered, and her eyes were so full of tears she dared not close them, as she rose, and pulling the sun-bonnet over her face, glided out of the office and up the garden walk. She ran up the stairs to her room, turned the key, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER VIII.

Weeks have passed, and the young Clara Gregory sits again, alone, at that western window, pale and troubled. The letter which she holds in her hand is the secret of her perplexity.

'He still loves me, then! He cannot give me up! He is so miserable—am I not cruel to condemn to misery one whose only crime is loving me too well? How gently he hints it—dear Brentford! But then a secret marriage seems so mean. Father, too. Then I have refused once, so positively. Shall I recant? I that am so inflexible! Indeed I should be ashamed to; still nobody would know it but Brentford himself.'

'I never did disobey my father in my life; still, as this letter says, I am the best judge what is necessary to my own happiness—and it concerns me only. Father did not consult my wishes about marrying himself, and so he could not help forgiving me if I should disregard his. Shall I shut myself up at home to see that detestable step-mother exult in her success in frustrating my plans? No, Brentford, no! She shall not exult, she shall know that there are no thanks to her that I am not yours. Yet, but for her, I do not believe father would ever have objected. I will not be thwarted by her. An elopement? What is that more than a thousand ladies have consented to? Some of the very most perfect that ever were imagined, too. Why should

I set myself up above all the world in my puritanism? It is no such shocking thing after all.'

'But father relies upon my honour and sense of propriety; oh, well, he will be glad afterwards, when he sees how happy I am, and will like me the better, perhaps, for showing a little of his own energy. It will be just the same in the end as though I were married at home, only a bit of romance about it.'

And so the girl went on, zealously persuading her willing self that nothing could be more excusable—justifiable—commendable, than for her to abscond from her father's house, and secretly to wed against his will.

'Yes, I come, Brentford,' she exclaimed aloud; and seizing a pen, she wrote and sealed a bond to that effect.

'Now I must go,' thought she, 'for I have promised.'

That evening she asked her father's permission to go on a few weeks visit to her friend Arabella, who had recently returned to her home.

'Oh, yes, my dear. I shall be glad to have you go and enjoy yourself as much as you can, and as fast, too, for we cannot spare you a long while.'

Clara's cheek burned as she thanked him, and turned away, for she knew he little imagined how long or how eventful was the absence she contemplated.

They thought she seemed strangely sad and agitated the next morning, as she bade them adieu to start on her excursion. Her sister felt a tear drop on her hand, as Clara embraced her and whispered—

'Good bye, dear, dear Alice.'

How anxious she seemed to do every little kindness for her father that morning, how solicitous to please him in all things. When he bade her 'good morning,' she seemed to wait for him to say something more; but he only added—

'Be a good girl, my daughter.'

What a rush of emotion crowded each other through her mind, when she found herself seated among strangers in the railway car, speeding away like the wind from that sweet home, and the life long friends who loved her as themselves; from the grave of her mother—whither? To the arms of one of whose very existence she had been ignorant but a few weeks ago. For his sake she had forsaken those tried and precious friends—had parted from them with a lie upon her lips. To him she was about to give her self.

Perhaps a painful doubt crossed her mind of the honour of one who could demand from one so young, so unadvised, such a sacrifice of truth, of duty, of home, just for his sake. Perhaps a query arose whether there was enough in him to compensate for all she lost, whether the charm of his society would last through all the vicissitudes of life.

An old man sat before her, and from every wrinkle of his time-worn visage, a quiet tone seemed to ask her—

'Will your heart still cling to its hero when the rust of poverty is on his shining garments, and care has furrowed his fair forehead, and his raven hair has grown gray, and his proud form bent, and his rich voice wasted and broken?'

She felt, too, like a fugitive; she fancied that people looked suspiciously at her. Especially there was an eye that vexed her; a black, piercing eye, that peered out from a pale face through a mourning veil. It looked as though it might read the inmost secrets of one's heart—and its frequent gaze became almost insupportable to Clara.

But they were rapidly approaching Burrill Bridge, the station where her lover had promised to join her. How intently she gazed from the window, as the Iron Horse began to halt, and the contractors shouted 'Burrill Bridge.'

There he stood, as distinguished as ever among the crowd. She felt a thrill of pride as she marked the involuntary deference with which the throng made way for his lofty form and said within herself, 'He is mine!'

With him once more at her side, listening to his fascinating tones, she felt that she was in little danger of making too great a sacrifice for him; she reproached herself that she had ever faltered. Still she felt guilty and unsafe, started at every new entrance, and it was with an emotion of dread that she glanced towards the stranger, whose observation had been so oppressive to her. But her eye brightened with an expression of relief as it caught the wave of her black garments passing into another car.

After a long, long ride of nearly forty eight hours they stopped.

'Oh! how far I am from dear quiet Vernon, in this great, strange city!' thought Clara. But her heart fluttered as she heard Brentford order the hack-man to 'drive to—church.'

'You shall be mine before we rest,' he whispered to her. Before another hour had passed the solemn irrevocable words were spoken which sealed her destiny! She felt their momentous import as she never had before.

A little group of loiterers in the vestibule gazed curiously at them as they passed out, and behind them Clara saw the same black eye that had annoyed her so much on the journey. Why should she be there, in the sultry noon, from the dust and weariness of travel?

CHAPTER IX.

That same afternoon the bride sat alone in her room in a fashionable hotel. A tap at the door—it was that stranger of the black eye and mourning dress. Though amazed

and not altogether pleased, Clara invited her to a seat.

'I think, ma'am, you were married this morning at—church, to Mr Brentford, is that so?'

Clara assented, with a faint blush.

'I could not tell you, if I should try, how sorry I am to blast your happiness; but perhaps you will be thankful to me sometime. I must tell you that he, who has just wedded you, is the husband of another. Mr Brentford has been, for four years, a married man.'

Clara stared at the woman in blank amazement; as though she did not comprehend what monstrous tale she was trying to make her believe.

At last, however, she seemed to understand, and with a sudden burst of indignation, and flashing eyes, she exclaimed—

'Who are you, that dare say such a thing? It is false! I know it is false! Brentford is true—he is honourable. I say, how dare you come here with that foul, despicable slander against him, my noble husband?'

She stood directly before her visitor, and clasped her hands together very tightly, that she might not seem to tremble. The black eyes looked mournfully and steadily on her as the stranger replied—

'Poor girl! I dare come here and tell you this, because I know it is the truth, and I would save an innocent young fellow-being from disgrace and misery. I know one who, five years ago, was as light-hearted a creature as ever trilled a song. Then she met Brentford. He flattered her. He sang with her. He said he loved her. He took her away from her happy, happy home in the sunny south, and carried her to the city. There he squandered her fortune, and deserted her.'

Could I be human and suffer another poor heart to be murdered in this same way?'

As she spoke she drew a paper from her pocket, and handed it to Clara, who had sunk into a chair, pale and speechless. She took it and opened it mechanically. It was a record of the marriage of Brentford and Bertha Vale, signed and attested in due form. She read it, again and again, then said sadly—

'How do I know that this is genuine?'

'There are witnesses, to whom you can refer, if you care to. The means of proof are ample.'

Clara's ear caught the sound of a well known foot fall on the stairs.

'You are Bertha Vale?' said she.

'Yes.'

'Sit in that recess and be silent.'

Summoning all the fortitude of her nature, Clara resumed the book which she had dropped on the entrance of the stranger, and threw herself, in a careless attitude, on a sofa. She was glad of its support—for it seemed to her she should sink to the ground. Brentford entered, and approached her with some playful speech. But as he crossed the floor, his eye fell on the shadow of the figure in the recess. He looked at it and stood agast. Then in a voice tremulous with passion, he cried—

'How on earth came you here?'

She made no reply, and Clara said, very calmly—

'Why should the lady not be here? She called to see me.'

'You called to see her, he exclaimed, advancing toward the intruder, and glaring fiercely on her. 'You shall not see her, you shall not speak a word to her, go you hence.'

She rose, saying simply, 'I am ready to go.'

'I tell you, Bertha Vale,' hissed her husband in her ear, 'if you ever cross my path again, you shall bitterly rue it.'

Her eye fixed itself unwaveringly on his as he spoke, while her small hand freed her arm from the grasp he had taken on it. She did not speak, and casting one pitying glance on Clara, glided out of the room. Brentford started after her as she went, then walked to the window, to see, apparently, whether she went into the street. There he stood, motionless, for several minutes, then placing himself, with folded arms, before the faded form upon the sofa demanded—

'What did she say to you?'

She raised her pallid face from the hands in which it had been hidden, and said sorrowfully—

'I cannot tell what she did say, but she made me know that I have been deceived, and I want to go home.'

'Yes, yes, I must go home,' she murmured to herself.

'No, no, she lied, I say. You shall not go—would you go and desert your own Brentford, dearest?'

'You are not mine,' said she, putting away the arm with which he would have encircled her, 'you are another woman's. I want to go home.'

She raised herself and strayed toward the table, where her bonnet lay. Brentford sprang after her and seized her hand, pouring forth a torrent of remonstrance, denial, invective, and command, in the utmost confusion. But Clara's inexorable will was, for once, her good angel; and, whether he raved or implored, she was still firm. Although so weak and trembling that she could hardly support herself, she suffered him to see nothing but cold, strong resolve; but as she opened the door to go, and saw his look of dark despair, she hesitated, and gave him her hand, saying—

'I do forgive you, Brentford.'

But the gleam of hope that shot into his eyes admonished her, and she quickly shut the door and ran down stairs, with—