

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE
G I R L H O O D
OF
SHAKESPEARE'S HEROINES ;
IN
A SERIES OF FIFTEEN TALES,
BY
MARY COWDEN CLARKE,

Author of the Concordance to Shakespeare.

“ as petty to his ends,
As is the morn-dew on the myrtle leaf
To his grand sea.”

Shakespeare.

TALE VI.
ISABELLA ; THE VOTARESS.

L O N D O N :
W. H. SMITH & SON, 136, STRAND ; AND SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, & CO.,
STATIONERS' HALL COURT.

1851.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

TO

DOUGLAS JERROLD, Esq.,

IN HOMAGE TO HIS GENIUS,

IN GRATITUDE FOR HIS FRIENDSHIP,

THIS TALE

IS CORDIALLY DEDICATED

BY

MARY COWDEN CLARKE.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

TALE VI.

ISABELLA; THE VOTARESS.

“A thing ensky'd, and sainted;”

Measure for Measure.

ALL the Vienna world was abroad, and gay, and well-dressed, and bent on pleasure; for it was the first of May,—when every Viennese puts on new clothes, and sallies forth, and makes holiday; and the city becomes a scene of colour and animation.

Through the public thoroughfares, the croud streamed on; rich and poor, high and low, haughty and humble, gentle and simple, the virtuous and the vicious, the nobleman and the tradesman, the lady, the milliner, the man of wealth, the artisan, the honest, the profligate, the wise, the foolish, the sober, the dissipated, the careless, the studious, the indolent, the industrious, the witty, the silly, the insolent, the modest, the proud, the coquette, the housewife, the flirt, the spendthrift, the miser, the home-lover, and the gad-about; all with one accord, joined the band of idlers, and swelled the throng that poured through the streets that fine May-morning, in holiday trim, and holiday talk, and holiday mirth and laughter, and in the freedom of universal association which holiday pursuit brings about.

For all the groups in this gay croud, whatever their class, or degree, or habit, or profession, or calling, or ordinary pursuit, had that day but one pursuit, and jostled and elbowed each other in temporary equality and unanimity; for it was the first of May, and all the Vienna world was abroad, and wending to see the foot-racing on the Prater.

The noble, and the wealthy, for the most part, kept their state, in coaches, or on horseback, surveying the croud on foot with toleration, or disdain, as the case might be, or with condescending approval, intimating that, as part of the show and stir of the scene, the others were welcome there, in their clean new dresses. The humbler pedestrians looked upon their lofty neighbours

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

with admiration, or with grudging, or with envy, as the case might be, also ; according to the several dispositions of the individual gazers in both ranks.

Among the pedestrians, was one couple, who, as they lounged along, were not sparing of their remarks upon the rest, and who uttered them in a loud jeering tone, regardless of being heard, or of giving offence.

The man,—a short, thick-set fellow, with a ferocious moustache, and a cruel eye ; a skin that bespoke double daily drink to daily bread ; a head held on one side, with an air that cast defiance in the teeth of all who cast eyes on him ; a swaggering step, and a general look of brutal ruffianism ;—held on his arm a young girl, who was young only in years, for her face had in it that which betokened an age of horrible experiences. There were in her countenance traces of beauty, but they were obscured to a pitying eye by the shadow of vice, by the hues of intemperance, by the lines which wrangling and brawling had left cut in upon the cheek, and round the mouth and eyes ; while in the eyes themselves, there would occasionally gleam a wild troubled look, that seemed like conscience betraying its inward struggle, and starting forth involuntarily to claim sympathy and compassion.

In her person there was the same confession ; recklessness of decorum in dress, and bearing, together with a something of shrinking consciousness at times, that seemed to plead for the sense of shame that yet remained. Her voice revealed similar existence of bad, with latent good. It was coarse, and unrestrained in its noisy vulgarity of speech and laugh ; but there were moments, when its tone would drop to an almost musical softness, and it would tremble and vibrate with genuine womanly emotion.

Now, however, it was raised to its height of repulsive loudness, as she laughed and talked with the ruffian companion on whose arm she hung, humouring his mood of jocularly in sneering at the passers-by, and assisting his invention by many smart sallies of her own.

In the midst of their boisterous mirth, it suddenly received a check, by one of the horses starting from the line of cavalcade, and plunging and rearing violently in their immediate vicinity. So close to them came the animal, and so entirely beyond the controul of his rider was he in his bounds and curvettings, that his hoof struck the girl, before she could get out of his way. She recoiled with a scream of pain ; while her companion sprang

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE VOTARESS.

7

forward, with an oath, to seize the horse's rein, and to revenge himself on the rider. But the animal dashed past him, and bore his master and himself away from the spot, leaving the other raging and foaming, and pouring forth a volley of curses and vows for vengeance.

"Don't heed it; I'm not much hurt—you'll only get yourself into trouble—let him be;" said the girl with difficulty; for she was struggling to hide the pain she was in.

"Not much hurt!" with another oath; "you might have been killed!"

The girl turned deadly pale, and held her hand to her bosom; but she continued to say she was not much hurt, and kept her other hand upon the man's sleeve to hold him back.

"No, no, not badly hurt;" she said; "only let me lean upon you for a bit, and take me out of the croud for a minute or two, and I shall be right enough soon."

The man led her up a quiet by-street; while she clung to him, as much, apparently, to detain him by her side, as to use his arm for support.

"Here, sit you down here, Nanni, my girl;" said he, as he turned through the gates of a little old church-yard, that was in the by-street; "sit upon one of these mounds, and get your breath, which that scoundrel frightened out of you with his horse's hoofs. I'll see if one arm can't strike as well as four legs, if ever I catch that young jackanapes!"

"Not here;" said the girl shuddering, and looking round. "I can't sit here. You said just now, I might have been killed; so I might—in that very moment—and have been brought and laid here." She looked round upon the graves; she looked up at the old church-tower that reared its grey head towards the sky; she looked up into that sky beyond, and a dark troubled expression settled on her brow. She thought, had she then been summoned to one of those earthly beds, what strange rest or unrest might have been hers.

"Why what a plague's come to the wench!" exclaimed the man, as he watched her disturbed look, and quivering lip, "you're no coward, are you, Nan, to shiver and shake after the danger's over? I know you're too brave a wench for that—or I shouldn't like ye as well as I do! Ugo Branz hates a milk-sop—be it man or woman—with all his body and soul!"

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Winding up this manifesto with a few more round oaths, having for aim milk-sops of all kinds, horses and horsemen of all sorts, mankind in general, and himself and his own body and soul in particular, he again demanded to know what a plague was come to the wench.

“O I don't know—nothing ;—nothing's come to me—nothing's the matter with me ; I'm better now ;” said the girl hurriedly. “But what's that—over there—sitting among the graves—all in white ? see !”

“I suppose you think it's a ghost ! What the devil's come over you ?” And this time Ugo Branz invoked condemnation on his eyes and limbs, as well as body and soul.

“A ghost ? No ; more like an angel !” said she. “It's a child. See how it sits, like a marble image ; with its folded hands and drooping head.”

“I'll tell you what, my girl,” said the man, “if you're going to stay here all day in this mouldy old church-yard, fancying ghosts, and spirits, and angels, and all that sort of rubbish, you may stay here by yourself ; for I shan't, I promise you. But if you choose to come along with me, and see the foot-running, like the jolly wench I know you for, generally, why, say the word, and come along, and don't stop moping and fooling here no longer.”

“I *am* a fool ; what's the good of moping and thinking ?” muttered the girl. “I often tell myself so—no use in thinking—be merry while I can—merry ! And so we'll be merry, shall we, Ugo ?” she went on, in her loud careless voice, and with her noisy laugh ; but both the tone and the laugh were forced and mirthless.

Her companion, however, was not one to detect want of true feeling of any sort, or any where ; as long as the semblance of high spirits was near him, he was satisfied ; and they soon joined the croud in the main street again, and went lounging, and idling, and mocking, and jesting on, as they had done before.

They reached the Prater, as the foot-race began. The competitors had just started ; and Ugo was soon eagerly engaged in watching them, and in betting with some of the bystanders, on the probable event of the course. The chances were very equal, the men engaged, being well matched in strength and activity. They were, for the most part, running-footmen, be-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE VOTARESS.

9

longing to the retinue of noblemen of distinction; and were dressed in coloured silk jackets, embroidered in silver. The vivid hues, and richness of their decoration, showed to peculiar advantage in rapid action; which, joined to their well-matched powers, gave additional brilliancy, animation, and interest to the sports. Ugo became more and more excited by the scene; his bets grew more numerous; his shouts to those he abetted, more vehement; his yells at those he disfavoured, more execrative; his oaths more savage, more voluble than ever. As the race concluded, he found himself a victor, by several heavy wagers, and in a state of foaming furious triumph.

In high good humour, still raving and panting, he seized the girl by the arm, and led her to one of the small way-side houses of entertainment that abound near there; taking his seat on one of the benches at a table set outside, for the accommodation of revellers, and calling upon all near him to congratulate him upon his winnings. He did not notice that in passing his arm through hers, the girl had shrunk abruptly, for she strove to repress all evidence of the pain he gave her by touching, even thus casually, the spot where she had received the blow from the horse's hoof; but afterwards, when Ugo had bawled his orders for beer and schnapps, and, in a fit of brute joviality, snatched the girl in his arms, to give her a sounding kiss, the sudden and rough pressure extorted a scream from her lips, which made him fling her from him, and exclaim with one of his usual curses:—

“What makes you squall, when a man's inclined to be jolly? Are you turned squeamish, or what? Because if you are, by Jove, you're no company for Ugo. There, be off with that white face of yours! Pah, it turns a man's liquor to milk. Be off with it, I say! Let's see no more of it!”

The girl made one attempt to lay her hand upon his arm, and to utter one of her forced laughs; but as her voice faltered, and she could not drive the look of pain from her lips by a feigned smile, he shook her off, and she turned away.

As she arose from her seat on the bench beside him, one of the bystanders said something as if in deprecation of Ugo's treatment of her; which this latter resenting, high words arose, mingled with execrations and threatened blows.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nanni, again forgetful of herself, would have clung to Ugo, to withhold him from danger, but, with a torrent of oaths, he protested that if she did not get out of his sight that instant, he'd fell her to the ground, and set his foot on her chalk face.

The girl crept away, giving a free course to the tears of suffering she had till then suppressed ; she occasionally put her hand to her bruised side as if it gave her great pain, and more than once raised her other hand to her head, as if full of thoughts that disturbed her with even greater.

She took no heed to wipe away the tears which blurred and smeared her face, but walked on in dogged misery, heedless of appearance or observation ; until at length she was beyond the chance of the latter, for she had wandered away from the crowded Prater, and was now in a quiet unfrequented path down by the river.

The hum of voices, the tread of footsteps, the trample of horses and carriages, the various sounds of a gay and eager croud, gradually grew fainter, subsiding in the distance ; the stillness of Nature softly replaced them, while the green of the leaves overhead, and of the grass beneath, with the mild blue heavens above, spanning the shining track of the Danube, helped to shed benign influence upon the agitated senses of the sufferer.

The drops fell less thickly from her eyes ; the swollen lids drooped less heavily, as her look encountered the cool tranquillity of the scene ; but still in her heart there raged the bitter sense of pain, of ill-usage, and the still keener sting of self-abasement and conscious worthlessness.

She flung herself down on the raised path by the way side, where she sat rocking herself to and fro, moodily gazing across the gliding waters into the space beyond, as if confronting the picture her fancy presented her of the outcast thing she was.

As she sat thus, a little footstep approached. A child, of but a few years old, came in sight, walking along the road by itself, looking about, as if somewhat uncertain of its way, yet keeping steadily on without stopping.

Nanni watched the child involuntarily ; and as it came near to the spot where she sat, she could not help saying :—

“Why, you're a bit of a thing to be wandering here by yourself. Where are you going to?”

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE VOTARESS.

11

"To Heaven," said the little one.

"Bless the child!" was the startled rejoinder.

"I'm trying to find my way there. There must be some way to get there; and I want to go up—up there—to her!" And the child pointed up into the blue sky with its baby finger.

"Where do you come from?"

"From the church-yard."

Nanni again started. The little creature stood there looking so innocent, so clear, so undarkened by earth's mistakes and guilt, that, for an instant, she might have seemed a newly disembodied spirit, freed from its coverings of fleshly and church-yard clay, coming forth to seek kindred dwelling-place with the angels above. For that instant, Nanni eyed the child, as if she would have scarce been surprised to see a pair of wings spread themselves from its shoulders, and bear it soaring away from her sight; but in another moment she recognized it for the same she had beheld that morning sitting upon one of the graves, when she was led into the church-yard to recover, by Ugo Branz.

"Do you know the way to Heaven?" resumed the child.

"Not I;" said Nanni with a would-be light laugh; but the old troubled look came into her face.

"Did you ever know it?" said the child; "have you forgotten it?"

"I might have known it, perhaps, one time"—replied the girl hurriedly; "yes, yes, I've forgotten it, I suppose."

"I wish I'd met you before you forgot it," said the child earnestly.

The troubled eye darkened still more, as the girl muttered something that sounded like:—"Would to God you had!"

"I wish I had;" repeated the child; "for I want to get there. They told me she was gone there—and I must go to her." The little one looked about her again; and seemed going to pursue her steady onward way, as before. Suddenly she held out her hand to Nanni, and said:—"Come with me; we'll try and find the way together, shall we?"

The girl burst into a passion of crying. "Too late, too late!" She exclaimed wildly; and beat her hands together, and clenched them among her hair.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00127-4 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The child stood looking in terror at this violence of grief ; but yet she found courage, after a pause, to go a little nearer, and repeat, " Do, come and help me to look for it ; if we find the way, you won't cry any more ; for they told me nobody's sorry there. Come, we shall be so happy there. Let's go. Do ; do."

And the little one, in her eagerness to cure misery which she saw, but knew not how to help, was about to put her arm round the neck of the girl, who had bowed her head upon her clasped hands ; when the latter, looking suddenly and almost fiercely up, cried :—" I can't—it's no use—too late, I tell you, too late ! Go, go ; you mock me ; go !"

The child, disconcerted, drew back ; and after standing a few moments more, vainly watching this wild wretchedness, finding that she did not raise her head, or speak again, the little creature, not without many a hesitating step, and wistful look behind, went upon her way, regretting the poor woman would not come and help in the search.

And still that unhappy woman sat there, with her head upon her clasped hands, her arms flung across her lap, her whole attitude expressive of the despondency that possessed her.

" Fit only to be trodden under foot, it was I—I—who flung myself into the dust and soil !" These were some of the goading thoughts whispered by conscience. " Castaway, abject thing that I am, abandoned, despised, lost,—who was it that first degraded my own being from what it might have been ? Had I not been false to myself, could the treachery of others have effected my ruin ? ' The way to Heaven ? ' Ay, I might once have learned it, had I kept, an innocent child, by my father's knee, and hearkened to the good lessons he taught. Had I never wandered from his cottage roof, or suffered myself to listen to words more flattering than his simple praise, I still might have been worthy—still have hoped ; but for me there is no hope—none. My feet were led astray once and for ever from the right path—and since then, lower, and lower, and ever lower, till now I am fallen among ruffian companions, insulted, outraged, spurned even by them !"

After remaining thus; some time, crouching listlessly, in a sort of stupor, as if abandoned to the lowly position which best seemed to assort with the