**The Clara We Knew**



Clara and Jessie

I see her sitting on the rocks at the water’s edge of their Block Island property, among the kelp and the seaweed. Barefooted, knees up, her hands binding her Mother Hubbard dress about them, perhaps her hair was wet for she was a strong swimmer. She could have been a sea-goddess . Approached, she raised her voice. It had an aristocratic southern tinge. People would question where she came from.

In point of fact Clara was born in Tarrytown, N.Y., but she had deep southern roots. Particularly in Petersburg, Virginia where she used to visit her grandmother. But her maiden name, Claiborne, is all over the Southern map: Claiborne, Alabama; Claiborne County, Tenn, etc. Her mother, Virginia McKenney, was also a Southerner. I recall our visiting her mother during WWII in Richmond, Va. Born, probably around 1890, she told us stories of the terrible destruction and disasters wrought by the Yankees during the Civil War. After all, the ‘90’s were not that removed from the peace signed at Appomattox Court House in April 1865. Did her family have slaves ? I don’t know.

Clara went to Dalton School, a private Manhattan school located in the East 80’s. There she connected up with Hadassah’s cousin Bunny and Bunny’s father Maurice Finkelstein. Maurice was a law student of Felix Frankfurter and later argued cases before the U.S Supreme Court. Maurice, sensing early Clara’s scholastic abilities, hired a special tutor to teach the two girls Greek. This arrangement lasted for several months. Another Dalton student was Jill Hibben (Hellendale). They were rejoined at Radcliffe.

In those college days of the early ‘40s, we were all, so it seemed, brilliant. But Clara’s brilliance seemed something apart; not so much from the store of knowledge which she certainly had, but from the meaning and the implications of her knowledge. She loved Dante, and one day she told me something that I used in one of the books I co-authored (*Descartes’ Dream,* p. 242) . Dante, Clara told me wrote that he would like his *Divine Comedy* and all great literature interpreted in two ways; the literal and the symbolic. He further divided the symbolic mode of interpretation into three: the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogic. The anagogic mode is less familiar. In this mode, people, events, and institutions are interpreted as a foreshadowing of the future state of bliss that awaits the faithful. In *Descartes’ Dream* , for what it was worth, I gave interpretations of the sentence ”The Computer Thinks” along literal, metaphorical, moral, and anagogic lines. These pages were an outcome of conversations and correspondence with Clara. I didn’t know the term at the time, but modes of textual interpretation are called *hermeneutics*.

America entered WWII on December 8, 1941. In those war years, it seems that young people were marrying early. (Survival of families ?) I married Hadassah in 1944 and I believe Clara married David Park in the same year. I was shortly after stationed in Langley Field, Hampton, Virginia at the NACA, and I recall that either in 1945 or 1946, we visited them in Washington. They were living in a small apartment in the Columbia Road vicinity. After they moved to Williamstown, Massachusetts, where David had taken a position in Williams College, we visited them frequently.

Clara had sharp opinions as what constituted literary value. Years ago, we were sitting in a restaurant with Clara and her son Paul. Paul had written a story in some sort of weird sci-fi genre – call it cyberpunk but this is a later term. Clara took him to task for wasting his talent on such material. Paul defended himself by saying that cyberpunk had its own writers, its own readership, its own publication outlets , and its own critical apparatus. Paul Park went on in later years to produce numerous successful sci-fi novels of grim alien worlds, etc.

The Clara of public acclaim had to do with her confronting the problems of autism. When her last child Jessie was about three, Jessie was diagnosed as autistic. Clara and David, but particularly Clara, were able to turn this difficulty into a personal, ethical, and even commercial triumph. Her book *The Siege,* relating how it is to live with an autistic child, with patience and insight, bringing out from the child what was of value from the point of view of the so-called normal world, won many honors and was translated into numerous languages. Responding to many invitations, Clara lectured frequently on autism and occasionally (which I thought was a mistake) brought along Jessie as “Exhibit A.”

I assume that the Claiborne family subscribed to the Episcopalian brand of Protestantism. I suppose that Clara and David were married in church. However I don’t believe that they were ever churchgoers. Having spent some time in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) where David lectured on physics, Clara became acquainted with Buddhism , viewed it sympathetically, and her daughter Rachel and her husband in later years became importers and sellers of art and ritual objects from India and Tibet.

Having lived frugally as a child, a frugal or spartan practice characterized Clara and David’s life style. Though their money increased substantially, I recall being in their house in the cold weather and freezing there. “Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?” Clara enjoyed the cakes and ale when provided by others.

I sometimes thought of Clara as a secular nun. And I shall bring these reminiscences to a close by citing a moralistic and moving essay of hers “On the Necessity of Hope, ” an essay from which we can all learn.