

Kingston William Henry Giles

**Ralph Clavering: or, We Must Try
Before We Can Do**



William Kingston

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Chapter One

A young girl dressed in a cloak and hat, and looking sad and somewhat timid, stood in the middle of the large hall of a fine old country house. The floor was of oak, and the walls were covered with dark oak wainscoting, from which hung down several full-length portraits of grim old knights and gentlemen in bag wigs, and ladies in court suits, looking very prim and stern.

The hall door was open, and through it was seen a post-chaise, from which a footman was extracting a small trunk and a variety of other articles, under the direction of a woman who, it was evident, had also just arrived. As there was no one to notice the young lady, she amused herself by looking round the hall and examining the portraits.

While she was thus employed, a door opened, and a lad appeared, who, running forward, put out his hand, and said, “And so you are my own cousin, are you? and your name is Lilly Vernon, is it?”

The young lady looked up with a quick, intelligent glance, and answered, “If you are Ralph Clavering, I conclude we are cousins, for I am, as you suppose, Lilly Vernon.”

“All right – how jolly!” exclaimed the boy. “We have been looking for you for some days, and I have been expecting to have great fun when you came. I once had a sister, but she is dead, and I have terribly wanted some one to help me kill the time since then, though I would far rather have had a boy cousin, I will tell you that.”

“I would rather help you to employ time than to kill it, Cousin Ralph,” said Lilly, with a smile. “It may chance to come off the victor otherwise.”

“Oh, is that the way you talk? I don’t like preaching,” exclaimed Ralph petulantly, and turning away with a frown. He came back, however, and added, “But I don’t want to quarrel with you. Come into the dining-room, and warm yourself by the fire, and have some luncheon. I was eating mine when you arrived, and I have not finished. We shall be all alone, for papa is out hunting, and mamma is ill in bed, as she always is. I should have gone out after the hounds too, but I was ill and lazy. I intend to take a trot this afternoon though. You can ride I hope – if not, I will teach you; but ride you must, that I am determined.”

“Oh, I can ride almost anything. I had a pony of my own – a spirited little creature – at home,” answered Lilly, a shade of melancholy passing over her features as she pronounced the word home.

Ralph did not observe it, but answered, “Oh, that’s capital! I should like to see you ride with me though, and take a ditch or a gate. There are not many things I do well, perhaps; but I do that, at all events.”

“Perhaps you try to do that, and don’t try to do anything else,” remarked Lilly.

“Oh, there you are again!” exclaimed Ralph, “I will not stand sermonising – remember that – so you had better knock off at once.”

He spoke in a tone so dictatorial and loud that Lilly stared at him, wondering whether or not he was in earnest.

The two young people had by this time reached the dining-room, where a substantial luncheon was spread, speaking well for the hospitality of Clavering Hall. Ralph, having helped his cousin with a courtesy which showed that he was well accustomed to do the honours of the table, filled his own plate with no unsparing hand, and addressed himself steadily to discuss the viands.

Lilly, who quickly got through her meal, looked up more than once, wondering when he would finish and talk to her again. Poor girl! she could not help feeling sad and forlorn. She perceived instantly that Ralph was not a person to treat her with sympathy, and at the best his kindness would be precarious. She was the daughter of a clergyman in the south of Ireland. Both he and her mother had died during a famine which had raged in that country. She had been thus left an orphan, and had been committed to the guardianship of her uncle and only near relation, Mr Clavering, of Clavering Hall. Unhappily he was not a person well fitted for the responsible office. Mrs Clavering was an invalid, and seldom quitted her bed-room. As Mr Clavering was also constantly from home, engaged in magisterial duties, or in hunting or shooting, their son Ralph was very much neglected and left to his own devices. These devices were too often bad, while, as was to be expected, he found his associates among his father's grooms, and other uneducated persons willing to flatter him. Thus noxious weeds were springing up in his disposition, which should carefully have been rooted out as they appeared; indeed. Master Ralph Clavering was being utterly ruined at the time of Lilly Vernon's arrival at Clavering Hall. He had been to school for some years, so that he was not altogether uneducated; but his education was far from finished when he unexpectedly appeared at home, and it was soon whispered about that he had been expelled for some act of insubordination and a flagrant exhibition of violence of temper. After this, as his father did not think fit to send him to another school, he was placed under the nominal charge of the curate of the parish, who undertook to superintend his further education till he was old enough to go to college. As, however, he only spent with him a few hours in the morning, and found numerous excuses for keeping away altogether, neither his character improved, nor did his progress in learning become satisfactory. Ralph, thus unchecked, yielded more frequently to his temper, became more dictatorial and tyrannical every day, till he was rather feared and disliked than loved by all with whom he came in contact. Such is the not very pleasant character our hero had obtained at the time our history commences.

Chapter Two

Lilly Vernon had been for some weeks at Clavering Hall. She had been kindly received by her uncle and aunt, had completely got over the timidity she felt on her arrival, and had found herself perfectly at home. Not so Bidy O'Reardon, her former nurse, who had accompanied her from Ireland, and was desired to remain as her personal attendant. Bidy did not comprehend all that was said, and thought that the other servants were laughing at her, and declared that though Clavering Hall was a fine place, its ways were not those to which she had been accustomed, and she heartily wished herself back at Ballyshannon in the dear ould country. Still, for the love of the young mistress, she would stay wherever she stayed, though it was a pity she had so ill-conditioned a spalpeen of a cousin to be her companion. These remarks reached Ralph's ears, and he and Bidy became on far from good terms. He revenged himself by playing her all sorts of tricks. One day he came into the little sitting-room in which she sat with Lilly and begged her to sew a button on his coat. Poor Bidy good-naturedly assented, but on opening her workbox found that her thimble had been trodden flat, her scissors divided, and all her reels of cotton exchanged for small pebbles! Enjoying her anger and vexation, Ralph ran laughing away, while Lilly gently, though indignantly, reproved him for his unkind and ungenerous conduct.

No one thought that a governess was necessary for Lilly; but happily her education had been carefully attended to by her parents, and she had formed the resolution of continuing the studies she had commenced with them. As soon as she could get her books unpacked, she set to work, and with steady perseverance performed her daily task, to the unbounded astonishment of her cousin, who could not comprehend why she should take so much trouble when there was no one "to make her," as he expressed himself.

It was a fine bright day in the winter when Ralph burst into the study which Lilly had very much to herself. "Come along, Lilly!" he exclaimed. "I have ordered out Apple-blossom for you, and I will ride Sugar-plum. Throw those stupid books away. What can make you drone over them as you do?"

Lilly looked up at her cousin with a serious expression in her calm eyes, and said, "Papa and mamma wished me to learn my lessons, and I want to do exactly as if they were alive. They always made me do my lessons before I went out, and so, Ralph, I cannot come."

Ralph Clavering looked very much astonished, and with a contemptuous curl of his lip and a frown on his brow left the room, exclaiming, "What can Lilly mean? She doesn't care for me, that's very positive." He threw himself on his pony, and switching it with more than his usual impetuosity, galloped off down the avenue. Lilly bent forward again to her self-imposed studies. Now and then she got up from her seat, and putting the book on one side and placing her hands behind her, repeated her lesson through with an expression of awe in her countenance, as if she thought her mother was looking over the book and listening to her. Lilly had just finished her work when Ralph returned. "What, old bookworm, have you really finished your stupid lessons?" he exclaimed. "You've lost a capital gallop, that I can tell you. However, you shall have one in the afternoon, though you don't deserve it. I've ordered Sugar-plum round to the stable to get a feed of corn while we are at luncheon, and in an hour he'll be ready again. Apple-blossom will be ready for you, and we'll have a capital ride after all."

Lilly said that she should like to ride, and soon afterwards luncheon was announced. The young people took it by themselves, for Mr Clavering was from home, and there were no guests in the house. Ralph tossed off a couple of glasses of sherry, scolding the butler for not quite filling them. "Good stuff after a gallop this cold weather," he observed.

Lilly shook her head. "You could do very well without that," she remarked.

"Oh, you girls know nothing," he answered contemptuously. "I could drink twice as much, and not be the worse for it."

In spite of Lilly's entreaties he took one or two more glasses, evidently for the sake of teasing her. Lilly found it difficult not to show her vexation. Ralph was in one of his obstinate humours. He had never been restrained when a child, and every day he found the task of restraining his temper become harder and harder. He owned this to his cousin. "Try, Ralph, what you can do," she answered. "Unless you try you cannot hope to succeed."

"Impossible," he answered petulantly. "It is absurd to suppose that I'm not to get into a rage every now and then. It is gentlemanly, it is manly."

"Oh, Ralph, what nonsense!" exclaimed Lilly. "Which is the most manly, to guide your pony along the road, or let it run away with you, flinging out at everybody it meets, and throwing you at last?"

"That's nothing to do with my getting into a rage if I please," said Ralph. But he looked as if he fully comprehended the simile; and as Lilly saw that he did so, and had no wish to irritate him, she changed the subject. Soon after this the ponies were brought to the door. Lilly, who had got on her riding-skirt, sprang lightly on Apple-blossom, Ralph not even offering to assist her, and away the two cousins galloped down the avenue. Ralph's good humour did not return for some time, in spite of all Lilly could do. At length her lively remarks and the fine fresh air gradually brought it back, and this encouraged her to talk on. They had a delightful and a very long ride. Sometimes they galloped over the level sward through a fine extensive forest in the neighbourhood, and through the deciduous trees, now destitute of leaves. There were many hollies and firs and other evergreens, which gave a cheerful aspect to the scene, and with the blue sky overhead they scarcely remembered that it was winter. Sometimes they got on a hard piece of road, and had a good trot for a couple of miles, and then they reached some fine open downs, when, giving their little steeds the rein, away they galloped as hard as hoof could be laid to the ground, with the fresh pure air circulating freely round them. Now they had to descend and to pass along lanes full of ruts and holes, where they had carefully to pick their way, and then they crossed some ploughed fields till they once more reached a piece of turf by the road-side. On the turf, Ralph was again able to make his pony go at the pace which best suited his taste, Lilly easily keeping up with him. Once more in the forest, they galloped as fast as ever along its open glades.

"This is first-rate," cried Ralph. "There never was a finer day for riding."

"Oh, indeed it is," responded Lilly. "This is a beautiful world, and I always think each season as it comes round the most delightful."

"I don't trouble my head about that," said Ralph, giving his pony a switch. "I know when it is a fine day, and I enjoy it."

Lilly had discovered that Ralph always carefully fenced off from any subject which he thought might lead to serious reflection. She waited her time to speak to him, hoping it might come. Soon after this they again reached the high road. Several times Ralph's pony, which had gone through a good deal of work that morning, attempted to stop, and when Ralph urged him on he stumbled.

"Sugar-plum must be tired," observed Lilly.

"Let us walk our ponies home."

"No, I hate everything slow," cried Ralph, hastening on the pony. "If the beast can't go he won't suit me, and so he shall soon find who is master."

Lilly again entreated him to pull up, but he would not listen to her. At some distance before them appeared a figure in a red cloak. Lilly perceived that it was an old gipsy woman with a child at her back. In a copse by the road-side there was a cart with a tent and a fire before it, from which ascended into the clear calm air a thin column of smoke. The old woman was making her way towards the camp, not hearing apparently the tramp of the pony's hoofs.

"Take care, take care, Ralph," cried Lilly; "you will ride over that poor old woman if you gallop on."

“I don’t care if I do,” said Ralph, angry at being spoken to. “She’s only a wretched old gipsy woman.”

“A fellow-creature,” answered Lilly. “Oh, Ralph, take care.”

Ralph galloped on till his pony was close up to the old woman, at a spot where the ground was rough, and there was a somewhat steep descent. He could scarcely have intended actually to ride over the old woman. Just then she heard the pony’s hoofs strike the ground close behind her. She started on one side, and the pony dashed on, shying as he did so. The animal’s foot at that moment struck against a piece of hard clay, and already almost exhausted, down he came, throwing his rider to a considerable distance over his head on the ground. Lilly slipped off her well-trained little pony, which stood perfectly still while she ran to her cousin’s assistance. Ralph’s countenance was pale as death. He groaned heavily, and was evidently much hurt. His pony, as soon as it got up, trotted off to a distance to avoid the beating its young master might have bestowed.

Lilly cried out to the old gipsy woman, who, although she could not hear, saw and understood her gestures. The old woman stood at a distance gazing at the scene, and then slowly and unwillingly came back. Lilly, as she watched Ralph’s countenance, became more and more alarmed. She endeavoured, by every gesture she could make use of, to intimate that she wanted assistance. The old woman knelt down by the lad, and putting her hand on his brow, and then on his arm, gave a grunt, and rising with more agility than could have been expected, hobbled off towards the gipsy camp. Lilly would have run on herself for help, but she dared not leave her cousin on the ground, lest a carriage coming rapidly down the hill might run over him. She anxiously watched the old woman as she approached the tent. No one came forth, and she feared that all the gipsies might be absent, and that no help could be procured. She was herself, in the meantime, not idle. She placed Ralph’s head on her lap, loosened his neckerchief, and chafed his temples, but her efforts were vain; he still remained unconscious, and she fancied that he was growing rather worse than better. Lilly knew that she could not lift him, though she longed to be able to carry him even as far as the green bank by the road-side. She was in despair, and could not refrain from bursting into tears. At last a thin dark man, with long elf-locks, accompanied by two boys as wild-looking as he was, and still more ragged, came running up.

“Ah! my pretty lady, don’t take on; your brother has still life in him,” he exclaimed when he saw Ralph. “Here, you Seth, lift up the young master’s legs; and Tim, you be off after his pony. Be quick, like lightning, in a hurry.”

Without more ado he raised Ralph from the ground, and bore him in his arms towards the tent. Lilly followed, leading Apple-blossom. They soon reached the gipsy tents. In one of them was a heap of straw. Ralph was placed on it. Lilly saw that the sooner medical aid could be procured the better. Still she did not like to leave him in charge of such doubtful characters as the gipsies.

“You will take care of him, and I will hurry home to bring assistance,” she said to the gipsy.

“Whatever you like, pretty mistress, for your sake we will do,” was the gallant answer.

Lilly mounted Apple-blossom, and galloped on to the Hall. Great was the consternation her news caused. Mrs Clavering was so ill that no one ventured to tell her of the accident. Mr Clavering was away from home, and the butler and housekeeper were out on a visit. Lilly found that she must decide what was to be done. She ordered the carriage to be got ready, and then she sat down and wrote a note to the doctor, which she sent off by a groom. By that time the carriage was at the door, and, with Biddy as her companion, she drove back to the gipsy encampment. They considerably took with them some food, and all sorts of things which they thought might be required. Just as they reached the camp they found the doctor, whom the groom had happily met. There, on a heap of dirty straw, under cover of a tattered tent, lay the heir of Clavering Hall. Lilly had hoped to take Ralph home; but directly Doctor Morison saw him, he said that he must on no account be carried to such a distance, although he might be moved on a litter to a neighbouring cottage, as the gipsy tent afforded neither warmth nor shelter from rain or snow. A door was accordingly procured, and Ralph was carried by

the gipsy and his two sons to a cottage about a quarter of a mile off, while the carriage was sent back for some bedding and clothes. No sooner had the gipsies performed the office they had undertaken than they hurried away; and when, some time afterwards Doctor Morison, at Miss Vernon's request, sent to call them back that they might receive a reward, they had moved their ground: the black spot caused by their fire, and some patches of straw, alone showed where their camp had been pitched.

"I fear, Miss Vernon, that your cousin is in a very dangerous state," said Doctor Morison, after again examining Ralph. "I think that it will be well if you return in the carriage, and break the news to his father. Remember, however, that I do not despair of his life."

This information made Lilly's heart very sad.

"He may die, and so unprepared," she whispered to herself. "Oh, may he be graciously preserved!"

How many, young as Ralph Clavering, have been cut off in the midst of their evil doings! An old woman and her daughter, the occupants of the cottage, gladly consented to give up the best accommodation their small abode offered to their wealthy neighbours. Mr Clavering, who had just reached the Hall, scarcely comprehended at first what had happened. Lilly had to repeat her tale. At length, when he really understood what had occurred, like a frantic person he threw himself into the carriage, and ordered the coachman to drive on as fast as the horses could go.

"What a wretched, miserable hole for my boy!" he exclaimed as he entered the cottage.

"Poor young master bean't accustomed to cottage rooms," observed the old woman, Dame Harvey, to her daughter. She could not forget that, humble as was her cottage, it was her own, and that she was bestowing a favour on those she had admitted within it. She was conscious at the same time that she was doing her duty towards them as a Christian, and this made her overlook, without complaint, many other slights she received. It was an anxious night to all concerned in Ralph's welfare. Doctor Morison feared that he had received a concussion of the brain, but could not decide whether it would prove serious till the next day. Mr Clavering scarcely left his son's bedside, nor would Lilly, had not Bidly filled her place, and she then consented to lie down on some chairs in a back room, where a large fire had been made up, a cart with fuel having arrived from the Hall. Ralph breathed painfully, it was evident that his life hung by a thread.

Chapter Three

Two days passed by, and it seemed very uncertain whether Ralph Clavering would recover. Lilly, by the doctor's orders, had to return home, but she begged that Bidy might remain to watch the invalid, and a more faithful nurse could not have been found. She, indeed, discovered with sorrow the true estimation in which her cousin was held at Clavering Hall; for among all the pampered servants not one volunteered, or seemed anxious to attend by his bedside. When he was well he ordered them roughly about, and abused them if they did not obey his often unreasonable commands. Now, as mean and irreligious persons are wont to do, they retaliated by treating him with neglect. Mr Clavering, whose fears for his son's life were fully aroused, only rushed out of the cottage for a few minutes at a time to calm his agitation, or to give way to his grief, and then hurried back to his bedside. He had sent for the housekeeper to attend on Ralph, but Mrs Gammage declined coming on the plea that her mistress required her attendance, and that her own health was so delicate that she should die of cold in Dame Harvey's cottage. The dame, therefore, and her daughter volunteered their services, and more careful attendants could not have been found. Mrs Harvey had been in service in her youth, and as she observed knew how to attend on gentlefolks. Food, and bedding, and furniture and all sorts of things had been sent from the Hall, and as the cottage was neat and clean, Mr Clavering might well have been thankful that his son had so comfortable a refuge.

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