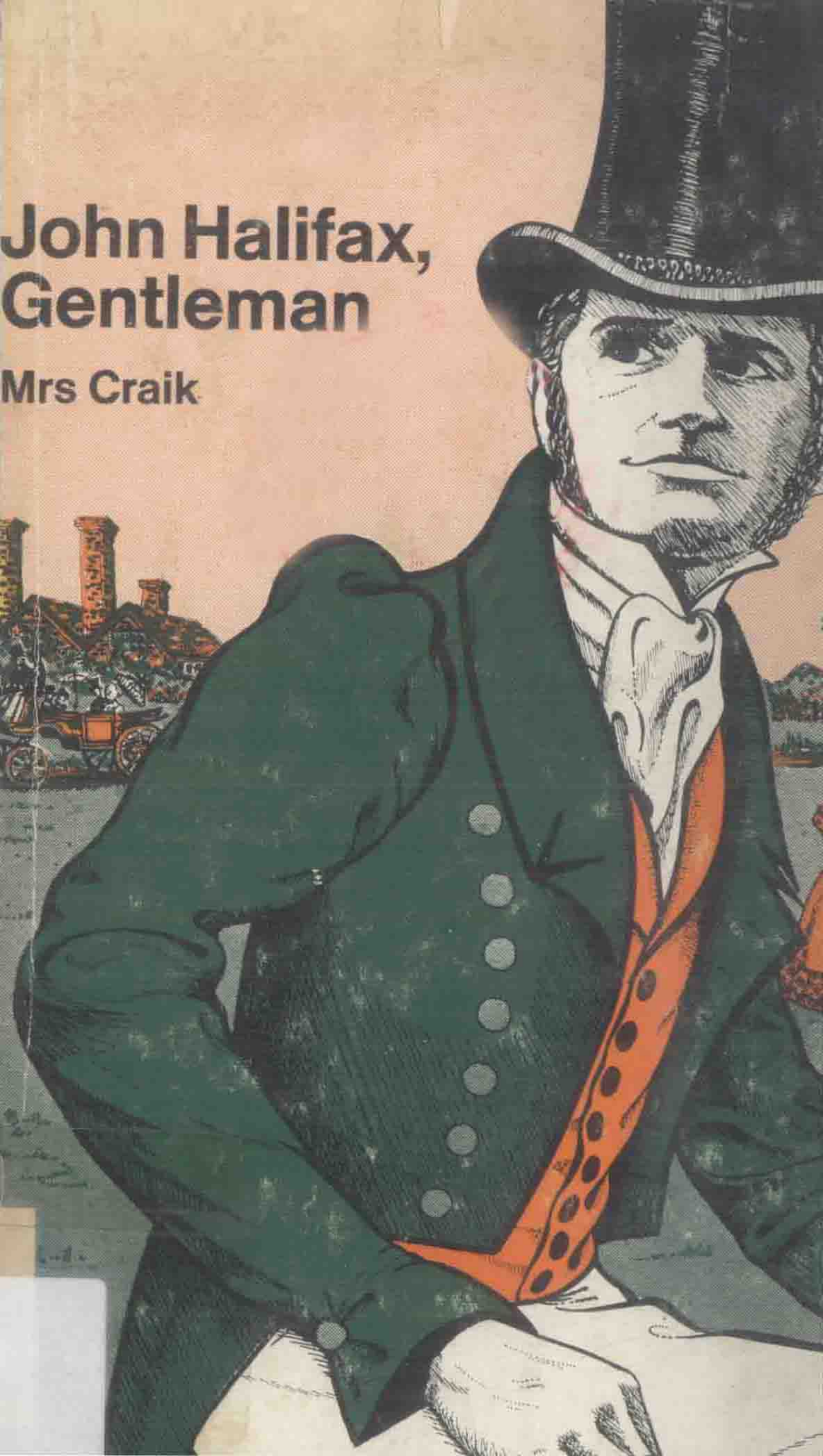


John Halifax, Gentleman

Mrs Craik



DINAH MARIA MULOCK
(MRS CRAIK)

John Halifax,
Gentleman

INTRODUCTION BY
W. M. PARKER



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*EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,
and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side*

DINAH MARIA MULOCK

(Mrs Craik)

Born in Staffordshire in 1826, the daughter of a Nonconformist minister. Came to London about 1846. In 1865 married George Lillie Craik. Died 1887.

INTRODUCTION

ONE of the most delectable regions in the West Midlands is the countryside which stretches from Elmley Castle, beneath Bredon Hill, through Bredon village to Tewkesbury. It is a landscape of lush meadowland; it is also a scene made famous as the background of *John Halifax, Gentleman*. Every traveller who visits this part of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, either to see the spots pictured in the story, or for the beautiful freshness the countryside distils, retains a memorable impression, for the entire locale is perfectly adapted for a domestic, regional novel like *John Halifax*.

The author of this landmark in English fiction was Dinah Maria Mulock, who was born at Longfield Cottage on Hartshill, between Newcastle under Lyme and Stoke upon Trent, on 20th April 1826. Her father, Thomas Mulock, had married a rich woman, Dinah Mellard, at Stoke parish church on 7th June 1825. Mulock, an eccentric religious enthusiast of Irish extraction, was brilliant but erratic and quarrelsome. He was restless and paid frequent visits abroad. In the summer of 1820, while staying at Eaux Vives, the suburb of Geneva, he had the temerity to send Sir Walter Scott three specimens of his own mediocre verse, and a covering letter with a proposal which was characteristic.

‘There seems to pervade all your literary efforts,’ he wrote, ‘so true & so tolerating a spirit of liberality towards inferior penmen that I make no apology for drawing the attention of the Author of so many permanent pages to the perishable printed article contained within the folds of this letter. It is an *echantillon* of a work to be entitled “Lake Lemman Literature,” and designed to include *Christian criticisms* on Calvin, Voltaire, J. J. Rousseau, Mad. de Staël, Gibbon, & Lord Byron. It strikes me that a MS. in the style & general scope of the present article might not be unacceptable to your publishers, of whom I know nothing more than that about this time five years since I met (no not your publisher but printer) Mr Ballantyne in

company with yourself at the very pleasantest London dinner I ever shared the joys of with your friend and admirer Terry.

'I have nothing to say for myself if my humble writings do not speak for me. You will judge, bearing in mind that the religion in which I glory has no relationship to the fanatical follies of *Macbriar, Gilfillan & Co.* False religion has produced and will produce enormities both in speculation and action which a sober avoidance of all religion will enable philosophers to steer clear of, but there is a *Christianity within Christianity* which the world dreams not of.'¹ Scott's fanatical characters, Macbriar and Gilfillan, are religious zealots in *Old Mortality* and *Waverley* respectively. I have quoted this letter as it displays something of the religious temper which Dinah inherited from her father.

Five years after Dinah's birth the Mulocks removed to Newcastle under Lyme, where Mulock lived in an atmosphere of disputation, came into conflict with mundane authorities, and was confined temporarily in the county asylum. Dinah received part of her education at the Brampton House Academy in the town, and later assisted her mother in managing a small school. In 1840 the family transported themselves to London, and there Dinah, as is evident in contemporary letters, entered with zest into an ampler atmosphere. 'I like walking about, enjoying myself,' she wrote, 'in the wide, handsome streets: there is always some novelty. . . . Just fancy me, actually me, mingling in the crowd of Piccadilly with Papa . . . then it is so delightful to go in the Park (the *Ring* in Hyde Park as it is called), and watch the *fashionables*, going their *morning* rides at six o'clock in the *evening*! . . . We are offered the use of a private box at Covent Garden throughout the winter by Mr Charles Mathews and his wife, Madame Vestris that was.' A wonderful experience for her was hearing Adelaide Kemble, the operatic soprano, in *Norma*—'the music haunted me for days and days.' She was also occupied in studying French, Italian, Latin, Greek, and Irish, but otherwise she did not do much general reading.

Dinah had made attempts at writing when quite young, but the sudden change in circumstances after her mother's death in 1845 made it necessary for her to take up authorship as a means of livelihood. She began a connection with the publishing firm of Messrs W. & R. Chambers, to whose famous *Journal* she contributed from time to time. One article, which appeared in the periodical on 21st August 1858, entitled 'Literary Ghouls: A Protest from the Other World,'

¹ MS. 3891, f. 93, National Library of Scotland.

was supposed to have been written by a dead author protesting against the action of those who resurrect the weaknesses and follies of literary lives. Byron, Shelley, and Charlotte Brontë seem to have been her principal examples of such treatment.

But her real authorship had begun in 1849 when her first novel, *The Ogilvies*, was published. This gave her a certain reputation, which was further established in 1850 by the appearance of *Olive*. Nine novels followed before she wrote the romance which brought her fame, *John Halifax, Gentleman*.

The inspiration of that tale came to her by chance during a visit to friends in the Cheltenham neighbourhood. One day when she drove over to Tewkesbury and saw the grand old Abbey and the medieval houses of the High Street she immediately decided that this fascinating country town should form the locale of a story she had already outlined. Accordingly, she made mental pictures on the spot. She lunched at the Bell Inn and noted the inn's bowling green, which she was to delineate so accurately in the novel. The landlord told her that the house had once been used by a tanner, and so she resolved her hero also would follow out that trade. In the novel the Bell has been transformed into the house of Abel Fletcher, the tanner, and the Abbey Mill, now a restaurant, is depicted as Abel's place of business.

Although Dinah had given her hero the Christian name of John, she could not hit upon a suitable surname for him. Then, on a subsequent visit to Tewkesbury to identify her background more clearly, she discovered in the Abbey churchyard an old gravestone on which was inscribed 'John Halifax,' and with that name her hero was christened. Ernest A. Baker, the librarian and historian of English fiction, has stated that the reputed original of John Halifax was Handel Cossham, the self-made colliery-owner, to whose semi-religious, semi-political discourses he used to listen as a boy.

Dinah began the novel in 1852-3 and finished it in 1856. Some of it was written at Detmore House, near Cheltenham, the Longfield of the narrative, 'a little nest of love and peace—where the children grew up and we grew old' (chapter xxiii), and some of the book was composed at Rose Cottage, near Amberley and Minchinhampton. The fictitious Enderley Flat was copied exactly from Amberley Common.

This improving story tells how John Halifax, one of 'nature's noblemen,' begins life as a poor boy and works his way up to prosperity and happiness by means of his high principles, undaunted courage, and nobility of character. Orphaned at the age of eleven

years, he is dependent thenceforth on his own resources. He willingly undertakes any kind of honest work, and for three years gains a livelihood by working for farmers, but at the end of that time is taken into the employment of Abel Fletcher, a wealthy tanner. This is the beginning of his better fortune, for Phineas Fletcher, his master's invalid son, takes a great fancy to him and helps him with his education. The heroine is Ursula March, whom he marries. The simple domestic tale includes few minor figures. The interest lies in the development of character, and the author's contention is that true nobility is of the soul and does not inhere in wealth, in learning, or in position, and that integrity and loftiness of purpose constitute the character of a true gentleman. The story is fresh, wholesome, and has a value for the social historian in its picture (perhaps idealized) of home life in England in the nineteenth century.

It was due to her friend and contemporary novelist, Mrs Oliphant, with whom she shared a London house, that Dinah secured a publisher for this romance. At a dinner-party, given for the purpose, Mrs Oliphant introduced her to Mr Henry Blackett. He read the manuscript, which impressed him, and, offering generous terms, his firm Messrs Hurst & Blackett brought it out in 1856. Dinah was usually a facile and rapid writer, but she took special trouble over this book, writing and rewriting it again and again to convey the truth exactly as she conceived it. As the proofs came in Mrs Oliphant and a friend teased and criticized Dinah and 'her dear John' most unmercifully, themselves helping with the corrections. None of them ever guessed that a potential best seller was in their hands. Its success was instantaneous, it was warmly welcomed in England, while in America its rare qualities and their actual significance were even more clearly understood and appreciated than in this country. It immediately took a unique position in the world of fiction, a position it holds to this day. As one commentator has remarked: 'It does not rank among the great masterpieces of fiction; and yet it lives on, admittedly one of the wholesomest novels in the language, inspired by the noble ideals of a good woman whose enthusiasms had not been stunted by a spurious intellectuality.' Its very limitations—it lacks humour, for instance—are part of its success. With *John Halifax*, indeed, Dinah led the van of books with tradesmen as heroes such as Adam Bede, the carpenter, and Enoch Arden, the fisherman; and the novel became 'to many a draughtsman, tradesman, and hard-handed toiler, on both sides of the Atlantic, a dear companion and a household name.' It may be regarded as not so much a novel

in the accepted term as a homely and poetic romance, a Gloucestershire idyll.

At least two of the main localities in the narrative have been based on actuality. There is little doubt that Abel Fletcher's tan-yard, round which the story so largely centres, was suggested by recollections of the tanneries at Newcastle under Lyme from which Dinah's mother's family, the Mellards, had for long drawn a comfortable living. 'Norton Bury,' which figures so prominently, stands for Tewkesbury, still proud to call attention to its association with the book. Ursula March never loses her attachment to Tewkesbury. She recalls her childhood days there. 'I rather admired the place. . . . Ah, those Abbey chimes!—how I used to listen to them!' (chapters xii and xiv). The crowd on market day at Norton Bury, we are told, included 'all classes, from the stout farmer's wife or market-woman, to the pale, frightened lady of "limited income," who had never been in such a throng before; from the aproned mechanic to the gentleman who sat in his carriage at the street corner, confident that whatever poor chance there was, his would be the best' (chapter xxxi). In several passages of the book we are given a panoramic view of the delectable region. John is made to become rapturous when, admiring the country in the Amberley district, he says to Phineas: 'Look what a broad valley, rich in woods, and meadow-land, and corn. How quiet and blue lie the Welsh hills far away. . . . It brings back a little bit of me which rarely comes uppermost now' (chapter xxiv).

Thirty years after *John Halifax* appeared, in the autumn of 1886, Dinah revisited Tewkesbury, by then closely associated with her fame. Once more she lunched at the Bell, when the delighted landlady, on being informed who her visitor was, told with pride that in summer 'hundreds of visitors, especially Americans, came to Tewkesbury, not so much to see the town and abbey, as to identify the scenery of John Halifax.' In subsequent years the stream of tourists continued. To this day, overseas visitors, who, in exploring England, make their first pilgrimage to Stratford on Avon to see the Shakespeare country, often make their second to Tewkesbury to acquaint themselves with the home of John Halifax.

The critics of the *Spectator* and the *Examiner* differed in their estimate of *John Halifax*. The former declared that though the author was known entirely by that book, 'yet "John Halifax," in itself a novel of the second class, is by no means even her best book.' The latter considered the work very good and interesting—'throughout

it is conceived in a high spirit and written with great ability, better than any former work of its deservedly-successful author.' One critic ventured to hint that the book might be placed in the same category as Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In an article on 'Le Roman de femme en Angleterre' in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*¹ the French critic and translator, E. D. Forgues, expressed his opinion of Miss Mulock's works in these words: 'Les tendances de Miss Mulock sont élevées, saines, franchement libérales, strictement religieuses.' The subject-matter of *John Halifax*, in particular, was considered to be extremely English. M. Forgues thought that Miss Mulock possessed the novelist's art in a higher degree than Charlotte Brontë. She showed exceptional skill in the grouping of incidents and characters. In conclusion he remarked: 'Il est impossible de lire des romans comme "John Halifax," sans envier sincèrement à nos voisins l'intervention salutaire du roman féminin dans l'éducation des jeunes filles.'

The permanency of its appeal has been touched upon by recent critics. In the nineties Dr Richard Garnett described the novel as 'a very noble presentation of the highest ideal of English middle-class life, which after nearly forty years still stands boldly out from the works of the female writers of the period, George Eliot's excepted.' And Annie Matheson, in a critical appreciation, doubted if 'full justice has ever yet been done to that mingling of austerity and passion, that single-minded economy of language, which of themselves go far to justify its extraordinary and lasting popularity.' Again, Ernest A. Baker reminds us that '*John Halifax* was long regarded by the faithful as a classic of the literature whose chief object is to do readers good. . . . The story goes so far back that a glimpse is afforded of Lady Hamilton, and it comes down to the age of steam and the riots occasioned by the introduction of machinery among the hand-workers.'

In 1858 Dinah stayed at Linacre Grange, Bootle, near Liverpool, and there she finished *A Life for a Life*, a problem novel. The following year she moved to London and resided first at Mornington Crescent, near Camden Town, and then at Wildwood, a cottage at North End, Hampstead. Among the many literary people she knew she was fortunate in having two particular friends, Charles Edward Mudie, who originated Mudie's Library, and Alexander Macmillan, the publisher, both of whom were able to help her. It was now that she became attracted to George Lillie Craik, a partner in the

¹ Février, 1860, seconde période, tome 25, pp. 829-30, 831.

Macmillan firm, and while spending the summer of 1863 in lodgings at Wemyss Bay, the Clyde watering-place, she became engaged to Craik, who was the son of the Rev. James Craik, D.D., minister of St George's Church, Glasgow, and Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for that year. Leaving Wemyss Bay in 1865, she prepared for the marriage, which took place in Trinity Church, Bath, on 29th April 1865.

The Craiks' first home was Arran Cottage at Upper Tooting, whence they went to Chilchester Lodge, Beckenham, Kent, and finally to The Corner House, Shortlands, near Bromley. Concerning the last-named abode, Mrs Craik wrote in a letter: 'I build the house with *books*, which has entailed the hardest work I ever did. . . . But I am struggling through it somehow, and the house, and my husband's delight therein, is reward for all.' There the Craiks extended hospitality to many celebrities. After a visit, Mrs Short-house, the wife of the author of *John Inglesant*, observed how 'books bedded in the recesses of the drawing-room, good paintings on the walls, and a sweet garden . . . made a very fascinating picture, and Mrs Craik herself, in her simple, dignified costume, reminded one of a Lady Abbess, only that the delicate lace which she always wore as a head-dress was not severe enough for convent life.' Another reference to her appearance informs us she had 'a good, sensible, trustworthy face, suggestive of a character entirely free from anything tawdry or meretricious; the hair under the soft lace . . . is parted smoothly above the wide, tranquil forehead, and the eyes look straight onward with a certain clear steadfastness. Nose, mouth, and chin, add to the impression of courage and veracity . . . and complete an aspect of gentle dignity and repose.' In 1887 these features were painted by Hubert von Herkomer, who depicted 'all that the painter can render of the repose, the quiet dignity, and the beauty of her advancing age.'

If Mrs Craik's looks were impressive, her nature and attitude to life were equally so. One who knew her intimately said: 'There never was a more tender or domestic nature.' Her outlook was that of the old-fashioned woman who loves her home, and she never became 'emancipated' in her ideas. Both she and her husband had business ability. It has been said that 'she got what was held to be a good price even in those days of high prices,' and that 'she received two thousand pounds for the copyright of one of her stories.' She never sat at a table to write. She just held a little block in her hand, as near to her weak eyes as she could, and scribbled away in any convenient

corner. In 1864, in recognition of her literary work, she received a Civil List pension of £80 a year which she set aside for authors less fortunate than herself. Meanwhile, Mr Mulock, evidently still dependent on his daughter's bounty, had settled at Stafford, where he died in 1869, aggressive to the last.

Mrs Craik herself died suddenly at The Corner House, Shortlands, on 12th October 1887. She had lived through the period of the second and third Reform Bill, the passing of the Education Act, the Abolition of the University Tests, and Gladstone's proposal for Home Rule; she had been a disciple of Frederic Denison Maurice; and now at her burial on 15th October in Keston churchyard, about three miles from Bromley, several representative figures of Victorian art and thought stood by the grave, among them Holman Hunt and John Morley. Lord Tennyson sent a wreath. A memorial sermon was preached on 16th October by the Rev. Henry F. Wolley, the vicar of St Mary's, Shortlands, who in his discourse paid her this tribute. 'Wherever our English tongue is spoken the name of the dear neighbour and friend we have lost is known and honoured. For eighteen years her gracious and kindly presence has been familiar to all who have worshipped within these walls. The remarkable assembly of men and women eminent in almost every department of literature, science, and art that gathered round her grave yesterday shows the estimation in which she was held by those best able to appreciate her gifts.'

In recognition of Mrs Craik's blameless life and the deserved popularity of *John Halifax* it was decided to perpetuate her memory by placing a medallion profile portrait of her on the transept wall in Tewkesbury Abbey. Erected by subscription, this memorial, beautiful and chaste, was the work of Henry Hugh Armstead, R.A. It is pure Renaissance style and bears the superscription: 'A Tribute to Work of Noble Aim and to a Gracious Life,' while under the medallion, around which appears the name of the authoress with the dates of her birth and death, is inscribed: 'She wrote John Halifax Gentleman.' Below again, as indicating her reverence and her faith, are given these words from near the close of *John Halifax*: 'Each in his place is fulfilling his day, and passing away, just as that Sun is passing. Only we know not whither he passes; while whither we go we know, and the Way we know—the Same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.'

The vogue of Mrs Craik's books—she wrote some fifty works, novels, prose essays, and verse—continued for long, and in 1891

those works, some of them illustrated by Sir John Millais, Sir John Tenniel, Holman Hunt, and Herkomer, were said to be more widely read than the works of any other novelist except Dickens. *John Halifax* alone has remained a perennial to this day.

W. M. PARKER.

1961

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