Scenes
of
Clerical Life

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BY

GEORGE ELIOT

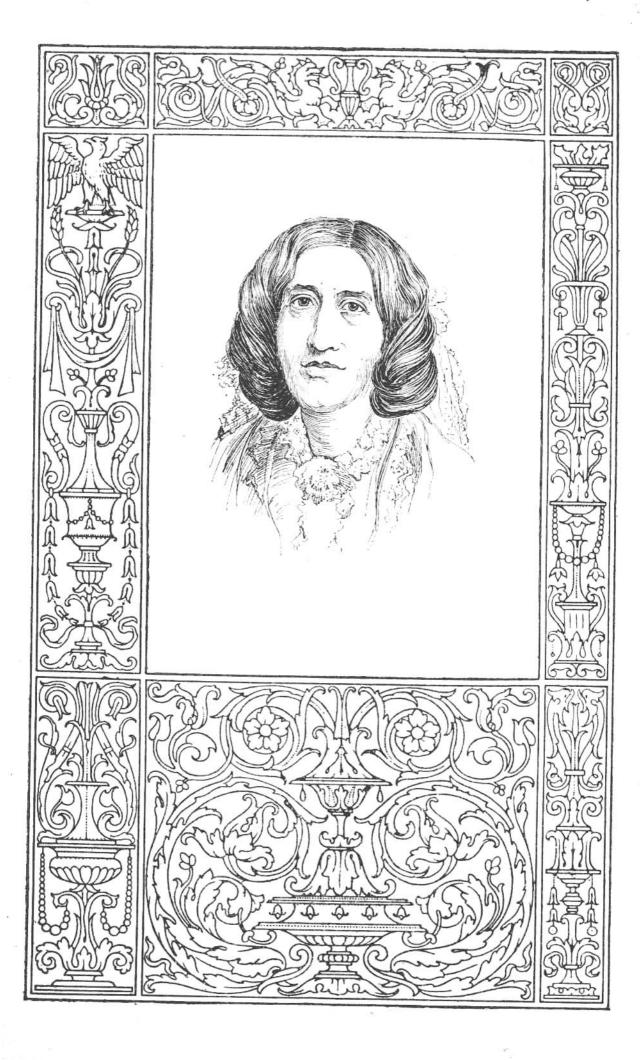
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ANNIE MATHESON

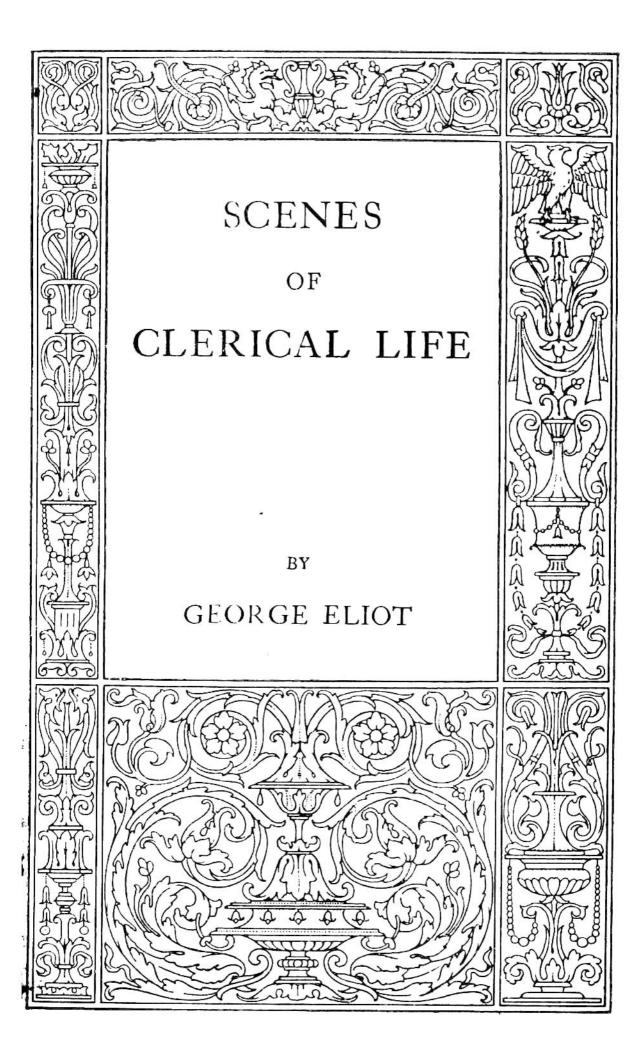


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INTRODUCTION

When George Eliot began to write these Scenes of Clerical Life, though she was already thirty-six, and had done much valuable work in the way of translation and editorial routine, she was still very diffident of her own powers, and thought she was lacking in certain qualifications necessary to the novelist.

We have to thank George Lewes and also, we must add, Mr. Blackwood, the publisher to whom Lewes submitted these first anonymous stories, for the warm encouragement and sympathy which led her to enrich the world by a gift so much greater than she, or her

friends either, had at first divined in her.

Those who have not leisure to read Mr. Cross's deeply interesting biography, yet desire authentic knowledge of her life in relation to her work, can find all they need, very succinctly and sympathetically given, in Sir Leslie Stephen's charming volume.

The setting of the three stories now before us lay in that Warwickshire which George Eliot knew and loved so well, the county into which her father, Robert Evans, who was, as we know, more or less the prototype of Adam Bede and Caleb Garth, had moved his home when he became agent for the Arbury estate under Francis Newdigate, on the death of that Sir Roger Newdigate of Arbury Park, who was the original of Sir Christopher Cheverel in Mr. Gilfil's Love-story. Harriet Poynton, Robert Evans's first wife, who had died ten years before George Eliot's birth, had been

for many years a trusted servant and friend of the Newdigate family at Arbury Park, in the parish of Chilvers Coton, better known to us under its pseudonym of Shepperton. Milly Barton seems to have been the wife of a Mr. Gwyther, curate of Chilvers Coton, who died when George Eliot was sixteen years old, and had been a friend of Mrs. Robert Evans, the latter being the original, by the way, of Mrs. Hacket. We learn also that Mr. Tryan's persecution was suggested by an actual experience, the details of course being altered. In Mr. Gilfil's Love-story the excellent plot was of George Eliot's own construction, though a certain Sally Shilton, the daughter of a collier, transformed by the novelist into Catharine Sarti, had really been adopted by the Newdigates; and their young heir, Charles Parker, did, like Captain Wybrow, die suddenly, this girl, who gave promise of musical gifts, being at that time a little over twenty. musical training given to her did not avail for the career the Newdigates had intended for her, inasmuch as her health proved too delicate, and she married a Mr. Ebdell, who was the vicar of Chilvers Coton. Out of these facts and her own vivid memories and creations George Eliot wove this beautiful trilogy which made her first volume of fiction.

It was no haphazard collection of short stories; for when she first showed to Lewes in the September of 1856 the scenes in *Amos Barton* with which these stories began, she expressed a hope that she might be able to write a series of tales embodying her impressions of the country clergy who had come her way, and these studies breathe the very atmosphere of English country life, as she knew it, in the early half of the nineteenth century. They are at once simple and complex, elementary and profound. For they touch the deepest realities of life itself, with all its hidden complexities and apparent simplicities; turning, like the noblest Greek tragedy, on those primary emotions which are our essential heritage, emotions which, while linking us with what is highest and most tender in the animals as part of our family, link us also with the Divine Love wherein we are born, and toward which the whole creation 'groaneth and travaileth'.

Strikingly diverse, despite their common setting, they nevertheless all turn upon the educating power of that Infinite Love, manifested through transcendent human affections—'loves' that 'in higher love endure,'—affection and loyalty through which the Most High often teaches us that, as has been well said, 'our hearts are restless till they rest in Him,' and find that love His dwelling place.

They are all stories of love and sorrow. Nor is the *leit-motif* which unites them merely what Tennyson has expressed, in the well-known lines of *Maud*,

'The dusky strand of Death enwoven here

With dear Love's tie, makes Love himself more dear.'

It is much more than that; for it suggests that through death as well as through life the Divine Love educates and redeems. Even when death comes, not as Walt Whitman's gentle 'Mother' and 'Deliveress', but seeming, as death often does, a cruel and unwelcome guest, snatching the young mother from husband and children when we think

they need her most, or leaving a Maynard Gilfil bereft of

his heart's desire on the very verge of its apparent consummation, we are yet made to feel, as in all highest art, that in the uttermost grief, as well as in profoundest rapture and joy, human lives are lifted into unseen possibilities, and are confronted with a vaster outlook, a more unquenchable hope, than our little curtained stage of earthly existence can ever hold or express; so that the protagonist in the conflict is found at the moment of death crowned with promises no human words can formulate, no mortal vision pursue to their fulfilment. The love of Amos Barton,-too absolute to dream that any fool could doubt its loyalty,-was not crushed or embittered by the bereavement which robbed him of his chief outward joy and comfort, but was consecrated to higher issues which, through his grief and loneliness, lifted this poor 'mongrel' whose 'very faults were middling', into fellowship with the loftiest and noblest souls, and gave to Milly's children a heritage that was far beyond ordinary wealth. The tragedy in which Maynard Gilfil was involved forbids any cheap glibness on the part of the critic. I may indeed well be warned off by some sneering and cynical person, who will inquire at this point whether it is proposed to analyse the wit and wisdom of these beautiful stories on the level of a Sunday School tract. But is there any admirer of this clean-limbed, candid young chevalier sans reproche who does not find him vastly nearer to all we worship, after he has passed through his mortal anguish with the courage of self-surrender and unmurmuring self-abnegation, than when he is merely an untried, charming young parson very deeply and unselfishly in love?—George Eliot had, doubtless, a special knowledge of timber through her long, intimate drives with her father over the estates for which he was responsible, and her imagery is especially telling when she compares 'the dear old vicar' Mr. Gilfil, to a tree. 'The heart of him was sound, the grain was of the finest; and in the grey-haired man who filled his pocket with sugar-plums for the little children, whose most biting words were directed against the evil-doing of the rich man, and who, with all his social pipes and slipshod talk, never sank below the highest level of his parishioners' respect, there was the main trunk of the same brave, faithful, tender nature that had poured out the finest, freshest forces of its life-current in a first and only love—the love of Tina.'

We are told that Mr. Blackwood was dissatisfied with the first part of Janet's Repentance, when it was sent to him for publication as part of 'the series', and I must admit that it seems to me the least satisfactory part of the volume before us. But the middle and end are so masterly and so moving that the story as a whole is surely one of the greatest of George Eliot's gifts to her fellow men. Here, as in Silas Marner and Adam Bede, she fearlessly drew for us the story of a soul not only restored and redeemed, but far stronger and more beautiful at the end of the battle than in the smooth days of untroubled youth.

And how full of sane, quick-beating charity are all these studies of human nature! All alike lead to the equipoise not of

^{&#}x27;——that false calm which many feign,
And call that peace which is a dearth of pain',

but to that deep and vibrating peace which passeth understanding, that secret home and temple of the heart, which

> 'For its very vestibule doth own The tree of Jesus and the pyre of Joan'.

'Ideas,' as George Eliot truly says, 'are often poor ghosts; our sun-filled eyes cannot discern them; they pass athwart us in thin vapour, and cannot make themselves felt. But sometimes they are made flesh; they breathe upon us with warm breath, they touch us with soft responsive hands, they look at us with sad sincere eyes, and speak to us in appealing tones; they are clothed in a living human soul, with all its conflicts, its faith, and its love. Then their presence is a power, then they shake us like a passion, and we are drawn after them with gentle compulsion, as flame is drawn to flame.'

We have already been reminded that 'while we are coldly discussing a man's career, sneering at his mistakes, blaming his rashness, and labelling his opinions—"Evangelical and narrow", or "Latitudinarian and Pantheistic", or "Anglican and supercilious"—that man, in his solitude, is perhaps shedding hot tears because his sacrifice is a hard one, because strength and patience are failing him to speak the difficult word, and do the difficult deed.'

We all know the dangers of indiscriminate giving, but Mr. Jerome's open-handedness was not indiscriminate, and modern selfishness, as well as certain forms of modern philanthropy and stultified communism, might well ponder deeply on Mr. Jerome's assurance that 'I'd rether give ten shillin' an' help a man to stand on his own legs, nor pay half-a-crown to buy him a parish crutch; it's the ruination on him if he once goes to the parish. I've see'd many a time, if you help a man wi' a present in a neeborly way, it sweetens his blood—he thinks it kind on you; but the parish shillins turn it sour—he niver thinks 'em enough.'

Here is practical wisdom of the best, that practical wisdom which is born of the heart where Wisdom and Love are one.

Colonel Newcome himself is not more finely drawn than Mr. Tryan, who, dwelling among the squalid homes of the saddest and most poverty-stricken, 'wants to mek himself their brother, like; can't abide to preach to the fastin' on a full stomach.'

There is not space here to quote the description of Mr. Tryan's study, but there is a fine passage in which George Eliot remarks that 'the man who could live in such a room, unconstrained by poverty, must either have his vision fed from within by an intense passion, or he must have chosen that least attractive form of self-mortification which wears no haircloth and has no meagre days, but accepts the vulgar, the commonplace and the ugly, whenever the highest duty seems to lie among them.'

Sir Leslie Stephen has laid his finger on the true vindication of George Eliot's work from the charge of a too pedantic didacticism and philosophic seriousness, when he reminds us that it is absurd to expect an author steeped in philosophic ideals, to present us in fiction with a world entirely devoid of their influence, and

elsewhere remarks, with a certain mordant incisiveness, 'If anybody holds that morality is a matter of fancy, and that the ideal of the sensualist is as good as that of the saint, he may logically conclude that the morality of the novelist is really a matter of indifference. I hold myself that there is some real difference between virtue and vice, and that the novelist will show consciousness of the fact in proportion to the power of his mind and the range of his sympathies.'

Even George Eliot's detractors are wont to make an exception in favour of these early stories and of Silas Marner. I am of the other school. By this I do not mean that I set these stories lower, for I believe them to be masterpieces of their kind,—and their kind is of the best,—but only that I set the other work high also,—am, in fact, in no sense à detractor, but a born admirer. It is, doubtless, an idiosyncrasy of temperament, and one which I am not insistent to defend, that while I confess the later novels are more open to criticism than the earlier, yet for sheer enjoyment Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda have been to me quite as enthralling as any; and even the much criticized Felix Holt has given me especially keen delight.

In all George Eliot's work, if I except Brother Jacob and The Lifted Veil and Theophrastus Such, I find power, humour, reality, indestructible charm. Yet, seeking to adjust the relative claims of her first fiction and her latest volumes, I confess that Milly Barton is to me a more vivid reality than Dorothea Brooke, Mr. Bates has to my thinking more verisimilitude than some of the subsidiary characters in Deronda, and Mr. Jerome

is a more familiar acquaintance than Mirah: but that is possibly the result of my own unspiritual bent, whereby I fail to recognize Dorotheas and Mirahs when I meet them, or find the salient oddities of a Mr. Bates more lifelike than the cruel emptiness and obstinacy of a Rosamond Vincy, whose blonde loveliness would, I fear, effectually blind me to her baleful character. What does seem incontrovertible is the almost overwhelming force with which the earlier novels bring home to the heart the joys and sorrows of people whom our commonplace souls would, if we met them in the flesh, be likely to pronounce rather uninteresting; and the genius with which the value and significance of the individual lot and of the individual soul, is intertwined with the realization that each is but one unseen drop in the rushing torrent of wider events, that torrent itself being but an infinitesimal incident in the cycle of a vaster cosmos.

Those of us who believe with Browning, that

'... each of the Many helps to recruit

The life of the race by a general plan;

Each living his own, to boot',

must be grateful for the superb art which never leaves either the 'each' or the 'many' out of account, and, while indicating the power of even human qualities to react upon environment and insensibly modify circumstance, invigorates and uplifts the spirit with a faith deeper than any circumscribing formula or narrowing logic of mere words,—faith which enabled Janet Dempster to say in the moment of parting with her earthly deliverer, 'God will not forsake me,' and to walk 'in the presence of unseen witnesses—of

the Divine Love that had rescued her, of the human love that waited for its eternal repose until it had seen her endure to the end'.

There is a resplendent passage on page 157, which I had marked for possible quotation, but since Sir Leslie Stephen has forestalled me in his chapter on Scenes of Clerical Life, I will content myself with pointing out the exquisitely simple word of comfort that follows close on this same passage which, but for that, might have seemed to imply the loneliness of a world from which God was absent. Tina, who is likened by Bates to his darling flowers, the 'nesh and dilicate' cyclamens, is here, as often throughout Mr. Gilfil's Love-story, compared to a little fluttering bird; and the thought of the sparrow that cannot fall to the ground 'without our Father', would seem to be implicit in the allusion to her 'torn nest', when, on the very next page to that which writes those terrible words which say she and her trouble were 'hidden and uncared for', we read that when she knelt down to say the little prayer of her childhood she added the words, 'O God, help me to bear it', and 'that day the prayer seemed to be heard'.

In Amos Barton, the first of the three stories now before us, which, in the poignant simplicity of its unsentimental pathos, and its awakening of our sympathy for the dullest and most commonplace of men, is from one point of view the author's supreme triumph, it is easy to admit faults of construction. It is much less perfectly welded than some of George Eliot's later work, and even betrays here and there a certain stiffness and awkwardness in its transition

from scene to scene. Its unfolding is less organic and inevitable than that of Adam Bede, for instance. Yet I am not at all sure that what at first appears a defect, may not be an obscure source of added power in the grip which the story takes of the imagination, whether it does not for that very reason hold the reader with a more impressive sense of actuality, as though some unaccustomed narrator were recalling vividly remembered facts which require a certain effort to marshal them in their due order. And it would be difficult to find one of George Eliot's stories more vital with the natural humour of life's delightful absurdities and incongruities, its mingling of the heroic with the trivial, the Divine with the homely. Of wit also it has more than its share.

In this quiet story of a village town, in which there are no sensational incidents, no swift surprises, no men or women in any way remarkable except for simple goodness, the very laughter provoked by the author's scathing sallies against those petty egotisms and self-deceptions, which we are apt to treat more leniently in ourselves than in others perhaps, not only relieves the strain of what would otherwise be a sense of grief too heavy to be borne, but at the same time really deepens the probing influence of its noble pathos—a pathos which is always finely restrained, and therefore the more moving. It stands for ever to the honour of Charles Dickens, whose most vaunted pathetic scenes lacked precisely that quality of selfrestraint, that he was among the first to recognize and extol, in the then unknown writer, 'the exquisite truth and delicacy both of the humour and pathos'.

In The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton, a story in which the closing scenes are touched with that economy of language, that wise control of feeling, which makes them the more profoundly touching from the absence of any emotional flourishes or rhetorical exaggeration, the children around Milly's deathbed are not likely to be forgotten by any one who, in imagination, has once stood beside them. Indeed, in her presentment of children, George Eliot always stands supreme, and her supremacy lies in the very fact that her children are as normal and delightful as hedgerow flowers. They are just such children as cross life's daily path, cheering as daisies and buttercups, or those dainty, fragrant bindweeds that bear a star in their pale blossoming and do not despise even the kerbstones of the village roadway, or the hillocks of the village graves. In the early stories they are especially bewitching, and it is not only Patty Barton who warms the memory with a loved caressing presence, but a whole troop of merry boys and girls who are never obtruded on the reader's attention, yet add to the sunshine and the sweetness of a world where there is much suffering, but also much innocent though transient delight, as well as more enduring joy.

Among the fine qualities incontrovertibly recognized in George Eliot's work, dramatic situation is not, as a rule, very strikingly in evidence, but there is a moment in Mr. Gilfil's Love-story which must in this regard satisfy the most exacting critic:—

"Yes, Maynard," said Sir Christopher, chatting with Mr. Gilfil in the library, "it really is a remarkable thing that I never in my life laid a plan, and failed to

carry it out. I lay my plans well, and I never swerve from them—that's it. A strong will is the only magic."

There follows an allusion to the happy marriages he has planned for Anthony, who is already beyond the reach of earthly planning, and for two others dear to the old man's heart, but all tangled in a sorrowful destiny beyond his unravelling.—And then . . .

'The door burst open, and Caterina, ghastly and panting, her eyes distended with terror, rushed in, threw her arms round Sir Christopher's neck, and gasping out—"Anthony... the Rookery... dead... in the Rookery", fell fainting on the floor.'

As a finished work of art, Mr. Gilfil's Love-story is, undoubtedly, the finest of the 'Scenes of Clerical Life', though Amos Barton is my own favourite; but it is in Janet's Repentance that we have perhaps the most perfect expression of the wise and loving philosophy which underlies them all. It is there that we are reminded that 'the only true knowledge of our fellow man is that which enables us to feel with him—which gives us a fine ear for the heart-pulses that are beating under the mere clothes of circumstance and opinion. Our subtlest analysis of schools and sects must miss the essential truth, unless it be lit up by the love that sees in all forms of human thought and work, the life and death struggles of separate human beings.'

If it be asked, how it was possible that one who had renounced what is ordinarily called Christianity, could yet indicate with such sincerity, as in these sketches of clerical life, the very source and secret