

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

ELIZABETH GASKELL
COUSIN PHILLIS
AND OTHER TALES



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EDITED WITH
AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
BY ANGUS EASSON

Oxford New York Toronto Melbourne
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1981

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

London Glasgow New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Wellington

and associate companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City

Introduction, Notes, Bibliography,
and Selection © Angus Easson 1981
Chronology © Oxford University Press 1981

This selection first published as a World's Classics paperback 1981

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gaskell, Elizabeth

Cousin Phillis and other tales. — (The World's classics)

I. Title II. Easson, Angus

823'.8 PR4710

ISBN 0-19-281554-7

*Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited
Aylesbury, Bucks*

INTRODUCTION

'My dear Scheherezade', is the flattering opening of one of Charles Dickens's letters to Elizabeth Gaskell. Scheherezade charmed her husband night after night to keep her head and if Elizabeth Gaskell, under lesser compulsions, was not so prolific, she proved from her earliest efforts that she was a natural story-teller. Dickens's flattery was not in any way a condescension to her art, even though part of an attempt to placate Gaskell after she had accused him of stealing and writing up one of her stories. It was sincere enough, for Dickens greatly valued Elizabeth Gaskell as a writer of fiction for his weekly magazine, *Household Words*, and knew she could spin tales as cunningly as the Sultan's wife in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*. In her turn, though she might resent his editorial interference, Elizabeth Gaskell knew the value of a man who paid well and promptly for what she wrote and who admired her talents enough to think her worth flattery when other writers were ignored or had their work unceremoniously altered, revised, and rewritten in the editorial office. Although never dependent upon her writings for a livelihood, Elizabeth Gaskell's range and art in her short stories alone would establish her professionalism.

Married in 1832 to William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister, Mrs Gaskell's family and duties in Manchester always came first. The late 1830s, though, saw the beginnings of a literary production which was to make her famous on publication of her first novel, *Mary Barton* (1848), and that lasted until her death in 1865, when she left her greatest novel, *Wives and Daughters*, not quite complete.

Her earliest independent piece, a contribution to William Howitt's *Visits to Remarkable Places* (1840), though a description of Clopton Hall in Warwickshire, includes story-shaped elements, as when she describes her schoolgirl self and a friend wandering round the old house:

There was a curious carved old chest in one of these passages, and with girlish curiosity I tried to open it; but the lid was too heavy, till I persuaded one of my companions to help me, and when it was

opened, what do you think we saw? – BONES! – but whether human, whether the remains of the lost bride, we did not stay to see, but ran off in partly feigned and partly real terror.

Oral tale-telling is strong in the jump at the audience on ‘BONES!’, while the terror that is ‘partly feigned’ and ‘partly real’ shows that psychological understanding, which underpins all of Gaskell’s best fiction, putting us here in touch with real girls.

Elizabeth Gaskell found it natural to tell stories and she told them well because she was a natural (not an artless) storyteller. A friend, Susanna Winkworth, testified to her power and her art: ‘No one ever came near her in the gift of telling a story. In her hands the simplest incident – a meeting in the street, a talk with a factory-girl, a country walk, an old family history, – became picturesque and vivid and interesting.’ The selection in this volume aims to show that range and that craft, for though the attraction of ghosts and witchcraft has kept a small number of the stories in print, Elizabeth Gaskell’s achievement in this form is comparatively little known and yet remarkable. In a busy life, apart from her novels and the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), she produced about thirty short stories, some of considerable length. As a novelist her career between *North and South* (1855) and *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) is a blank, yet apart from the outstanding biography of Charlotte Brontë, she produced thirteen stories, two of them novellas, in this time. Even her earliest fictions, ‘Sunday School’ stories combining instruction with entertainment, show her knack for detail and humour.

As well as delighting in storytelling, Elizabeth Gaskell found that the time she could spare for writing from being wife, mother, and controller of a household was often best expended on the shorter forms of fictions. Stories also sold well and money towards household expenses was no mean consideration. The market for shorter fiction in magazines was expanding and once enough stories had accumulated through periodical publication they might be collected in volume form and paid for twice over. In 1858, in Germany, planning to extend a family tour but without the cash to do so, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote two stories for Dickens and was paid £40 by return. Such was her value to Dickens and his to her. Despite

all coolnesses and a sense on her side of never quite trusting him, it was to Dickens for his magazines *Household Words* (1850-59) and *All the Year Round* (1859-70) that Gaskell sent most of her work. The first five stories printed here went to him; the other two appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* (founded 1860), managed by George Smith of the publishers Smith, Elder, with whom Elizabeth Gaskell was drawn into association by the writing and publication of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. For Smith she wrote her greatest short fiction, 'Cousin Phillis', but as the stories in this collection show, her contemptuous disparagement of work as 'good enough for Dickens' was rather a humorous knock at the man than a selling short on artistic worth.

'Lizzie Leigh', like Elizabeth Gaskell's first great success, *Mary Barton*, is set largely in Manchester. In it, Gaskell explores the possibilities in two ways of life meeting and reacting when Mrs Anne Leigh, impelled by love of her lost daughter, dead to her through the duty she owes her husband, comes from the country to the town. The story is partly a quest and partly a mystery in its interlinking of Susan and the foundling child, of Will's love and Lizzie's recovery. The death of Lizzie's child may seem harsh: it is, though, not only the price Lizzie must pay for restoration to her family but also the penalty of James Leigh's grim judgement on his daughter. If the use of the Palmers to knot together both plots – Lizzie's discovery and Will's love – is a little contrived, the connecting links are expertly placed and the chastened reunion in love and sorrow of mother and daughter is balanced by the happy union of Will and Susan, while Gaskell infuses the whole with a sense of acute observation that shows how intensely she saw what she wrote. When Susan produces the child's things, there 'was a little packet of clothes – very few – and as if they were made out of its mother's gowns, for they were large patterns to buy for a baby'. Through such detail Elizabeth Gaskell authenticates her world.

Like many of her contemporaries, Elizabeth Gaskell delighted in ghost stories. She tells how one night, when Charlotte Brontë was visiting her, 'I was on the point of relating some dismal ghost story, just before bed-time' – though Charlotte, her nerves strung up, 'shrank from hearing it'. A

'dismal' ghost story: because when we want to be frightened we want to be frightened as thoroughly as possible. When in 1852 Charles Dickens asked Elizabeth Gaskell to contribute to the special Christmas number of *Household Words*, a ghost story was very much in order and 'The Old Nurse's Story' the result. At the beginning, when the Nurse feels no terror at the ghostly organ music, thinking rather it was 'pleasant to have that grand music rolling about the house', the story has the strength to dare to laugh at its own terrors, but this early reaction is modified and first awe and then terror predominates from the Nurse's discovery that the organ plays despite being empty inside. The threat to the child menaces more and more, while past and present meet in the hall where the lighted chandelier gives no light and the blazing fire no heat. Hatred and jealousy are re-enacted, proof of how real is the threat to Rosamond. There is no cheating on the ghosts nor on the destructive nature of human passion.

The Old Nurse herself comes from Westmoreland. The Lake District was well known to Elizabeth Gaskell from family holidays and more memorable by being the scene of her first meeting with Charlotte Brontë. It was too the home of Wordsworth, a poet to whom Gaskell responded deeply. 'Half a Life-Time Ago' and 'The Crooked Branch' both show how Elizabeth Gaskell drew on and transformed Wordsworth. If she does not employ Wordsworth's challenges to our response nor his exploitation of language and romance conventions of storytelling in poems like 'The Idiot Boy', yet the characters' relations to each other and environment, as in Wordsworth, display 'the essential passions of the human heart'. Susan Dixon, in 'Half a Life-Time Ago', is torn between two loves, that for her brother and that for her prospective husband. Her vow at her mother's death-bed to care for her brother is unaffected by his subsequent mental collapse, so when Michael, her betrothed, makes Willie's consignment to a lunatic asylum the price of their marriage, Susan breaks with him. But the sacrifice is not one of those that mean giving up what we do not want. Michael's charm is made clear in the episode when Susan finds, after quarrelling with him for hitting Willie, that her brother is easily won to devotion again by Michael. Susan's hunger for that love which Michael alone

can give finds concrete expression in her vigil beneath the wrecked yew tree, while the struggle of the way she has chosen in faith to her vow and duty to Willie, who offers no comfort or reward by return of love, is deftly expressed by the intermittent physical wrestling with her brother's fits, compelling her at the worst times to 'sally out to taste the fresh air, and to work off her wild sorrows in cries and mutterings to herself'.

If Susan Dixon yet has the consolation of helping Michael Hurst's widow, her end happier than seemed likely, the ending of 'The Crooked Branch' is starkly tragic. In its original form, one in a sequence of tales for the 1859 Christmas number of Dickens's new periodical, *All the Year Round*, the title was 'The Ghost in the Garden Room'. With nothing directly supernatural, 'The Crooked Branch' is a story of the return of the dead. Benjamin's haunting of his parents is the more horrible because he is still in the body when he stages the resurrection so long wished for by his mother, so terrible in its manifestation and outcome. In setting the devotion of the old couple's adopted daughter, Bessy Rose, against the warping of their son, Gaskell develops a favourite contrast between the man who with all worldly opportunities turns them to corruption and the woman who employs what talents she has to make rich the lives of others.

Another part of Gaskell's romantic inheritance appears in 'Lois the Witch', published earlier in the same year as 'The Crooked Branch'. The witch-hunts of seventeenth-century New England have in this century powerfully served Arthur Miller in *The Crucible* to parallel Macarthy's UnAmerican Activities Committee. An eighteenth-century writer might have viewed the events with scepticism and made their perpetrators hypocrites. Yet Gaskell, though she does not believe in witchcraft, recognizes the terrifying fact that most of those involved, both prosecutors and victims, believed and trembled. Her romantic recognition of man's inner darkness, of the shaping power of the imagination, helps her depict the psychology of hysteria both collective and individual in a community shut off from the world, turned in upon itself, where fear, jealousy, superstition and literal belief all tangle; where panic, once started, cannot be halted until it has worked

out its fury in destruction, leaving the community aghast, like those self-betrayed, at the evidence of their own turbid passions. Gaskell enters imaginatively into the minds of those who believe in witches. Orphaned and exiled, Lois is trapped, by her circumstances and by the Hickson family, headed by its proud matriarch, Grace, prepared to humble herself only when her unlovely yet beloved son's tottering sanity is threatened. Belief in witchcraft is a force that feeds upon the entwined desires of those in community, township, and family, feeds too upon the individual heart, which is powerful for wickedness as well as for love, and the story insists upon the tragic consequence for Lois. Only at the end, when it is too late, does the story open out into the light of reason with the community's confession and plea for forgiveness, brought to us by Holdernessee and Hugh Lucy, who stand in the mental and physical freedom that so contrasts with the dark depths of imagination and society that destroys Lois.

Imagination predominates too in 'Curious, If True', yet the ambiguity of the title enforces the joke of the story. For this is a world viewed through the literal eye of a puritan (Whittingham stresses his descent from Calvin), while the author's imagination plays with the effect of time upon the timeless creations of fairy and folk tales. Only an adult who has delighted in fairy tales could enjoy the story: a child would be too innocent and an ignorant adult merely bored. Part of the fun is in spotting the figures distorted by time and by Whittingham's oblique vision, while the power of these creations to delight through the ages is suggested when, as Whittingham ascends the stairs, he almost fancies 'that I heard a mighty rushing murmur (like the ceaseless sound of a distant sea, ebbing and flowing for ever and ever), coming forth from the great vacant galleries that opened out on each side of the broad staircase'. It is, though he doesn't know it, the constant and eternally new repetition of 'Once upon a time'.

Sleeping Beauty is among the guests at the Chateau and it might be easy to suggest her story as the pattern of 'Cousin Phillis'. Phillis Holman, though, is not merely waiting to be woken by a kiss. She is a girl passing naturally through adolescence into full maturity, coming violently into the passionate life through her love for Holdsworth. She is not

asleep, but growing, a process often painful even as it is inevitable. Change is hinted at in her progress from childish pinafore to a woman's apron and the story explores change both in Phillis and in the larger society of which she and Holdsworth are part. The Holman family's world of Dissent, inherited from the seventeenth century, with a continuity of values on one hand from Virgil and Horace and from Christianity on the other, is faced by the new world of railways and political change. Phillis learns Italian so she can read Dante, but Holdsworth, who thinks she reads Dante to learn Italian rather than to seize hold of a sublime poet, suggests she read Manzoni's great historical novel, *The Betrothed*. Manzoni's novel not only challenges the values of the world of Dissent by being a fiction, it belongs also to the new world of Italian nationalism, a world of political change that goes hand in hand with the mobility of society and ideas that the railways bring. Such change is not necessarily bad, though it may be regretted.

And yet even within Phillis's world, life is not static. There are indeed moments when Phillis seems held, unchanging – when for instance Paul and Holdsworth watch her after she has been shelling peas, framed by the window, or later when Holdsworth sketches her. Each time, though, Phillis moves, embarrassed once she is aware of the watchers, unable to have her portrait drawn because her feelings are so changed by Holdsworth. Change in the larger world may be inevitable; change in the individual is unavoidable. Even the cycles of the farming year underline this, for the two hay harvests, alike yet not the same, are times of crisis in Phillis's relationship with Holdsworth; and yet how different is the situation between one year and the next.

Holdsworth is not a villain. He does not jilt Phillis, he is free to love and marry in Canada, though he shows how Gaskell's men may feel less deeply, are less devastated by love than her women. His sphere of activity is large, physically spanning Italy, England and North America, where Phillis's is turned upon herself, in suffering. As the title reminds us, it is Phillis's story and though we never learn from Paul what happens to her later, one thing seems certain: that her final hope for a return to the old ways is a vain one. She cannot be a child.

again, for the transition from pinafore to apron was more than a change of garments. 'The same kind of happy days never return', and whether Phillis is to love again or not, whether she marries or remains single, she cannot go back into the past. The idyllic elements of the Holman farm do not conceal the rigours of agricultural life nor do the idyllic elements of the story conceal the changes that Phillis has undergone. Along with loving creation of detail, Gaskell reveals a toughness that characterizes all her best work, whether comic or tragic.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text of each story is that of first volume publication: publishing details are given in the notes at the end of the volume. Obvious errors have been corrected, while the spelling of a few words (e.g. 'sate' for 'sat' and 'grey' for 'gray') and certain features of punctuation have been made consistent. The use of inverted commas conforms to the style of the World's Classics. A very few textual emendations have been silently made. On proper names, Elizabeth Gaskell could be very off-hand; in 'The Old Nurse's Story', for instance, the servant Agnes is also called Bessy. With one exception the first name used by Gaskell is adopted throughout: in 'Cousin Phillis' the ladies where Paul lodges are here called the Misses Dawson, not the Misses Brown, and their brother consequently called Mr Dawson instead of Hunter. The brief explanatory notes at the end of the volume are keyed into the text.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

THERE is no complete edition of Elizabeth Gaskell's works: the most comprehensive, both now out of print, are *The Works of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. A. W. Ward, 8 vols. (Knutsford edition, 1906), which excludes *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and *The Novels and Tales of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. Clement Shorter, 11 vols. (World's Classics, 1906-19), which includes *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Oxford English Novels included *Cranford*, ed. Elizabeth Porges Watson (1972) and *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson (1973) with introductions and annotations: both since issued as paperbacks and *Cranford* issued in the new World's Classics. Penguin English Library have published *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Wives and Daughters*, *Cranford* and *Cousin Phillis*, and *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, with introductions and annotations: these are good, except that *Wives and Daughters* has a corrupt text. The novels and a selection of the short stories are available with modern introductions in the Everyman Library.

The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell, immensely readable as well as providing much biographical material, are edited by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (1966), while a selection of them, with linking biographical narrative, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Portrait in Letters*, is edited by J. A. V. Chapple and J. G. Sharps (1980).

The biography by A. B. Hopkins (1952) is largely but not entirely superseded by the new material of the letters, of which Winifred Gérin was able to take advantage (1976), though she does not always take sufficient account of Gaskell's Manchester background.

Studies that include biographical information but are more concerned to use background material to illuminate a reading of the work are J. G. Sharps, *Mrs Gaskell's Observation and Invention* (1970) and Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1979). An excellent short critical introduction is Margaret Ganz, *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict* (1969) and on the novels two useful studies are W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell*

and the *English Provincial Novel* (1975) and Arthur Pollard, *Mrs Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer* (1965).

Not much has been written on the short stories. Edgar Wright has some discussion in *Mrs Gaskell: The Basis for Reassessment* (1965) and the studies by Easson, Ganz and Sharps give consideration to them. John Lucas has a chapter on 'Mrs Gaskell and the Nature of Social Change' in *The Literature of Change* (1977), which includes 'Cousin Phillis'.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

		<i>Age</i>
1810	Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson, second surviving child of William Stevenson and Elizabeth Holland, born in Chelsea 29 September	
1811	(November) After her mother's death, Elizabeth is taken to Knutsford to live with her Aunt Hannah Lumb	1
1822-7	Attends School at Misses Byerley's in Warwick and Stratford on Avon	12-16
1828-9	Her elder brother, John Stevenson (b. 1799), disappears while on a voyage to India. Elizabeth goes to Chelsea to live with her father and stepmother	17-18
1829	(22 March) Elizabeth's father dies; she goes to Newcastle upon Tyne, to the home of the Revd. William Turner	18
1831	Spends much of this year in Edinburgh with Mr Turner's daughter. Visits Manchester	20-1
1832	(30 August) Marries the Revd. William Gaskell, assistant Minister at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, at St John's Parish Church, Knutsford. They live at 14 Dover Street, Manchester	21
1833	Her first child, a daughter, born dead	22
1834	Her second daughter, Marianne, born	23
1837	A poem, 'Sketches among the Poor', by Mr and Mrs Gaskell, appears in <i>Blackwood's Magazine</i> (January). Her third daughter, Margaret Emily (Meta), born. Mrs Hannah Lumb dies	26
1840	Her description of Clopton Hall included by William Howitt in <i>Visits to Remarkable Places</i>	30
1841	Mr and Mrs Gaskell visit the Continent, touring the Rhine country	30-1
1842	Her fourth daughter, Florence Elizabeth, born. The family move to 121 Upper Rumford Street, Manchester	31-2
1844	Her only son, William, born; dies of scarlet fever at Festiniog, 1845	33-4
1846	Her fifth daughter, Julia Bradford, born	35
1847	'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras' published in <i>Howitt's Journal</i>	36
1848	'Christmas Storms and Sunshine' in <i>Howitt's Journal</i> . Her first novel, <i>Mary Barton</i> , published	37-8

		Age
1849	Visits London, where she meets Dickens and other literary figures. Meets Wordsworth while on holiday in Ambleside. 'Hand and Heart' published in the <i>Sunday School Penny Magazine</i> , 'The Last Generation in England' in <i>Sartain's Union Magazine</i> , America	38-9
1850	The family move to 84 Plymouth Grove, Manchester. Dickens invites Mrs Gaskell to contribute to <i>Household Words</i> : 'Lizzie Leigh' begins in first number, followed by 'The Well of Pen Morfa' and 'The Heart of John Middleton'. <i>The Moorland Cottage</i> published. First meets Charlotte Brontë in August	39-40
1851	'Mr Harrison's Confessions' appears in <i>The Ladies' Companion</i> . Continues to write for <i>Household Words</i> , the first episode of <i>Cranford</i> appearing in December. Visited by Charlotte Brontë in June. Her portrait, now in the National Portrait Gallery, painted by Richmond	40-1
1852	'The Schah's English Gardener' and 'The Old Nurse's Story' in <i>Household Words</i> . 'Bessy's Troubles at Home' in the <i>Sunday School Penny Magazine</i> . Gives Charlotte Brontë the outline of <i>Ruth</i> (April). Visited by Dickens (September)	41-2
1853	<i>Ruth</i> (January) and <i>Cranford</i> (June) published. 'Cumberland Sheep-Shearers', 'Traits and Stories of the Huguenots', 'Morton Hall', 'My French Master'. 'The Squire's Story' all in <i>Household Words</i> . Begins <i>North and South</i> . Visits exchanged with Charlotte Brontë	42-3
1854	'Modern Greek Songs', 'Company Manners' in <i>Household Words</i> : <i>North and South</i> begins to appear in September. Her husband succeeds as Minister of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester. Visits France with Marianne: meets Mme Mohl and William W. Story. Meets Florence Nightingale in London. Last meeting with Charlotte Brontë	43-4
1855	'An Accursed Race', 'Half a Lifetime Ago' in <i>Household Words</i> . <i>North and South</i> and <i>Lizzie Leigh and Other Stories</i> published. In June, Charlotte Brontë's father asks her to write his daughter's <i>Life</i> . She and Meta spend a month in Paris with Mme Mohl	44-5
1856	'The Poor Clare' in <i>Household Words</i>	45-6
1857	<i>Life of Charlotte Brontë</i> published. Visits Paris and Rome with her two eldest daughters and Catherine Winkworth	46-7
1858	'My Lady Ludlow', 'Right at Last', and 'The Manchester Marriage' in <i>Household Words</i> . 'The Doom of the Griffiths' in <i>Harper's Magazine</i>	47-8
1859	<i>Round the Sofa and Other Tales</i> published. 'Lois the Witch'	48-9

and 'The Crooked Branch' in *All the Year Round*. Visits Whitby where she collects material for *Sylvia's Lovers*. Takes her daughters Meta and Florence to Germany, returning via Paris

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| 1860 | <i>Right at Last and other Tales</i> published. 'Curious if True' in <i>The Cornhill</i> . Visits to France | 49-50 |
| 1861 | 'The Grey Woman' in <i>All the Year Round</i> | 50-1 |
| 1862 | Visits Paris, Normandy, and Brittany with Meta and a friend, returning to London for the Exhibition. Back in Manchester she over-exerts herself in relief work among the workmen, and has to recuperate. Writes a Preface to Vecchi's <i>Garibaldi</i> | 51-2 |
| 1863 | 'A Dark Night's Work', 'An Italian Institution', 'The Cage at Cranford', and 'Crowley Castle' in <i>All the Year Round</i> . 'Cousin Phillis' in <i>The Cornhill</i> . <i>Sylvia's Lovers</i> published by Smith, Elder. Visits Mme Mohl in Paris, going on to Rome with three of her daughters. Her daughter Florence marries | 52-3 |
| 1864 | 'French Life' in <i>Fraser's Magazine</i> . <i>Wives and Daughters</i> begins to appear in <i>The Cornhill</i> . | 53-4 |
| 1865 | <i>Cousin Phillis and Other Tales</i> and <i>The Grey Woman and Other Tales</i> published. Visits Dieppe, and Mme Mohl in Paris. Buys a house, The Lawns, nr. Holybourne in Hampshire, and dies there suddenly on 12 November | 54-5 |
| 1866 | <i>Wives and Daughters</i> published posthumously | |