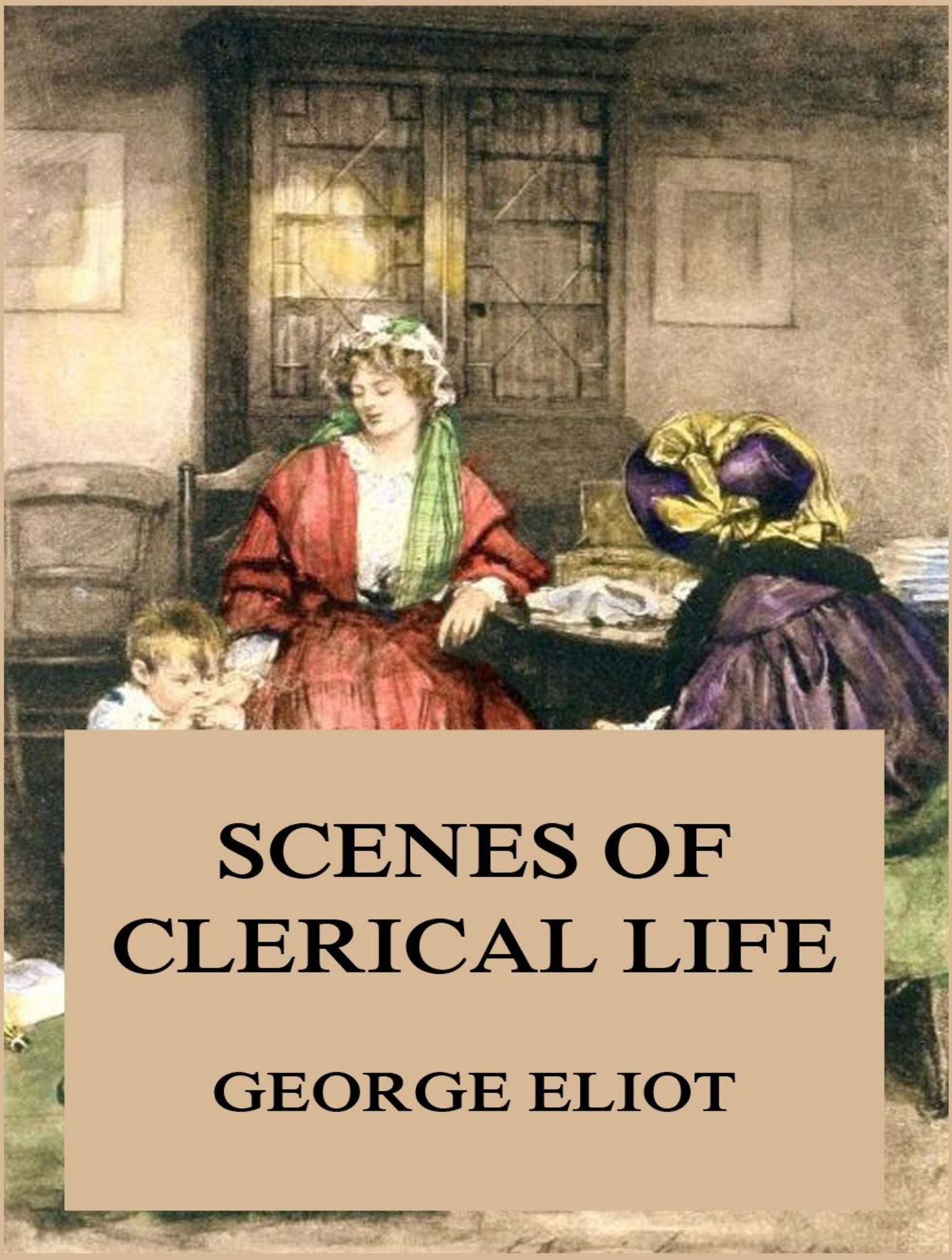

SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE

GEORGE ELIOT

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INTRODUCTION

George Eliot, or Mary Ann Evans, was born at Arbury Farm, in the parish of Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, on the 22nd of November, 1819. She was the fifth and last child of her father by his second wife—of that father whose sound sense and integrity she so keenly appreciated, and who was to a certain extent the original of her famous characters of Adam Bede and Caleb Garth.

Both during and after her schooldays George Eliot's history was that of a mind continually out-growing its conditions. She became an excellent housewife and a devoted daughter, but her nature was too large for so cramped a life. 'You may try,' she writes in Daniel Deronda, 'but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and to suffer the slavery of being a girl.'

While her powers were growing she necessarily passed through many phases. She became deeply religious, and wrote poetry, pious and sweet, fair of its kind. Music was a passion with her; in a characteristic letter written at the age of twenty to a friend she tries but fails to describe her experience on hearing the 'Messiah' of Birmingham: 'With a stupid, drowsy sensation, produced by standing sentinel over damson cheese and a warm stove, I cannot do better than ask you to read, if accessible, Wordsworth's short poem on the "Power of Sound."' There you have a concise history of George Eliot's life at this period, divided as it was between music, literature, and damson cheese.

Sixteen years of mental work and effort then lay between her and her first achievement; years during which she read industriously and thought more than she read. The classics, French, German, and Italian literature, she laid them all under contribution. She had besides the art of fortunate friendship: her mind naturally chose out the greater intelligences among those she encountered; it was through

a warm and enduring friendship with Herbert Spencer that she met at last with George Henry Lewes whose wife she became.

In this way she served no trifling apprenticeship. Natural genius, experience of life, culture, and great companionship had joined to make her what she was, a philosopher both natural and developed; and, what is more rare, a philosopher with a sense of humour and a perception of the dramatic. Thus when her chance came she was fully equipped to meet it.

It came when, at the age of thirty-six she began to write 'Amos Barton,' her first attempt at fiction, and one that fixed her career. The story appeared in 'Blackwood's Magazine,' and was followed by 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story' and 'Janet's Repentance.' Of the three, 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story' is perhaps the most finished and artistic; while 'Amos Barton' has qualities of humour and tenderness that have not often been equalled. 'Janet's Repentance,' strong though it is, and containing the remarkable sketch of Mr. Tryan, is perhaps less surely attractive.

The stories, all three of them, have a particular value as records of an English country life that is rapidly passing away. Moreover, it is country life seen through the medium of a powerful and right-judging personality. It is her intimate and thorough knowledge of big things and small, of literature and damson cheese, enabling her and us to see all round her characters, that provides these characters with their ample background of light and shade.

It is well to realise that since George Eliot's day the fashion of writing, the temper of the modern mind, are quite changed; it is a curious fact that the more sophisticated we become the simpler grows our speech. Nowadays we talk as nearly as we may in words of one syllable. Our style is stripped more and more of its Latinity. Our writers are more and more in love with French methods—with the delicate clearness of short phrases in which every word tells; with the rejection of all intellectual

ambulations round about a subject. To the fanatics of this modern method the style of George Eliot appears strange, impossible. It does not occur to them that her method has virtues which lack to theirs. They may give us a little laboured masterpiece of art in which the vital principle is wanting. George Eliot was great because she gave us passages from life as it was lived in her day which will be vital so long as they are sympathetically read.

George Eliot can be simple enough when she goes straight forward with her narrative, as, for instance, in the scene of Milly Barton's death; then her English is clear and sweet for she writes from the heart. But take the opening chapter of the same story, and then you find her philosophical Latinity in full swing: the curious and interesting thing being that this otherwise ponderous work, which is quite of a sort to alarm a Frenchman, is entirely suffused by humour, and enshrines moreover the most charming character studies.

These lively and acute portraits drawn from English country life give its abiding value to George Eliot's work. Take the character of Mr. Pilgrim the doctor who 'is never so comfortable as when relaxing his professional legs in one of those excellent farmhouses where the mice are sleek and the mistress sickly;' or of Mrs. Hackit, 'a thin woman with a chronic liver complaint which would have secured her Mr. Pilgrim's entire regard and unreserved good word, even if he had not been in awe of her tongue.'

Or take Mrs. Patten, 'a pretty little old woman of eighty, with a close cap and tiny flat white curls round her face,' whose function is 'quiescence in an easy-chair under the sense of compound interest gradually accumulating,' and who 'does her malevolence gently;' or Mr. Hackit, a shrewd, substantial man, 'who was fond of soothing the acerbities of the feminine mind by a jocose compliment.' Where but in George Eliot would you get a tea-party described with such charming acceptance of whim?

George Eliot wrote poems at various times which showed she never could have won fame as a poet; but there are moments of her prose that prove she shared at times the poet's vision. Such a moment is that when the half broken-hearted little Catarina looks out on a windy night landscape lit by moonlight: 'The trees are harassed by that tossing motion when they would like to be at rest; the shivering grass makes her quake with sympathetic cold; the willows by the pool, *bent low and white under that invisible harshness*, seem agitated and helpless like herself.' The italicised sentence represents the high-water mark of George Eliot's prose; that passage alone should vindicate her imaginative power.

Grace Rhys

The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton

Chapter 1

Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and-twenty years ago. To be sure, its substantial stone tower looks at you through its intelligent eye, the clock, with the friendly expression of former days; but in everything else what changes! Now there is a wide span of slated roof flanking the old steeple; the windows are tall and symmetrical; the outer doors are resplendent with oak-graining, the inner doors reverentially noiseless with a garment of red baize; and the walls, you are convinced, no lichen will ever again effect a settlement on—they are smooth and innutrient as the summit of the Rev. Amos Barton's head, after ten years of baldness and supererogatory soap. Pass through the baize doors and you will see the nave filled with well-shaped benches, understood to be free seats; while in certain eligible corners, less directly under the fire of the clergyman's eye, there are pews reserved for the Shepperton gentility. Ample galleries are supported on iron pillars, and in one of them stands the crowning glory, the very clasp or aigrette of Shepperton church-adornment—namely, an organ, not very much out of repair, on which a collector of small rents, differentiated by the force of circumstances into an organist, will accompany the alacrity of your departure after the blessing, by a sacred minuet or an easy 'Gloria'.

Immense improvement! says the well-regulated mind, which unintermittingly rejoices in the New Police, the Tithe

Commutation Act, the penny-post, and all guarantees of human advancement, and has no moments when conservative-reforming intellect takes a nap, while imagination does a little Toryism by the sly, revelling in regret that dear, old, brown, crumbling, picturesque inefficiency is everywhere giving place to spick-and-span new-painted, new-varnished efficiency, which will yield endless diagrams, plans, elevations, and sections, but alas! no picture. Mine, I fear, is not a well-regulated mind: it has an occasional tenderness for old abuses; it lingers with a certain fondness over the days of nasal clerks and top-booted parsons, and has a sigh for the departed shades of vulgar errors. So it is not surprising that I recall with a fond sadness Shepperton Church as it was in the old days, with its outer coat of rough stucco, its red-tiled roof, its heterogeneous windows patched with desultory bits of painted glass, and its little flight of steps with their wooden rail running up the outer wall, and leading to the school-children's gallery.

Then inside, what dear old quaintnesses! which I began to look at with delight, even when I was so crude a members of the congregation, that my nurse found it necessary to provide for the reinforcement of my devotional patience by smuggling bread-and-butter into the sacred edifice. There was the chancel, guarded by two little cherubims looking uncomfortably squeezed between arch and wall, and adorned with the escutcheons of the Oldinport family, which showed me inexhaustible possibilities of meaning in their blood-red hands, their death's-heads and cross-bones, their leopards' paws, and Maltese crosses. There were inscriptions on the panels of the singing-gallery, telling of benefactions to the poor of Shepperton, with an involuted elegance of capitals and final flourishes, which my alphabetic erudition traced with ever-new delight. No benches in those days; but huge roomy pews, round which devout church-goers sat during 'lessons', trying to look anywhere else than into each

other's eyes. No low partitions allowing you, with a dreary absence of contrast and mystery, to see everything at all moments; but tall dark panels, under whose shadow I sank with a sense of retirement through the Litany, only to feel with more intensity my burst into the conspicuousness of public life when I was made to stand up on the seat during the psalms or the singing. And the singing was no mechanical affair of official routine; it had a drama. As the moment of psalmody approached, by some process to me as mysterious and untraceable as the opening of the flowers or the breaking-out of the stars, a slate appeared in front of the gallery, advertising in bold characters the psalm about to be sung, lest the sonorous announcement of the clerk should still leave the bucolic mind in doubt on that head. Then followed the migration of the clerk to the gallery, where, in company with a bassoon, two key-bugles, a carpenter understood to have an amazing power of singing 'counter', and two lesser musical stars, he formed the complement of a choir regarded in Shepperton as one of distinguished attraction, occasionally known to draw hearers from the next parish. The innovation of hymn-books was as yet undreamed of; even the New Version was regarded with a sort of melancholy tolerance, as part of the common degeneracy in a time when prices had dwindled, and a cotton gown was no longer stout enough to last a lifetime; for the lyrical taste of the best heads in Shepperton had been formed on Sternhold and Hopkins. But the greatest triumphs of the Shepperton choir were reserved for the Sundays when the slate announced an ANTHEM, with a dignified abstinence from particularization, both words and music lying far beyond the reach of the most ambitious amateur in the congregation: an anthem in which the key-bugles always ran away at a great pace, while the bassoon every now and then boomed a flying shot after them.

As for the clergyman, Mr. Gilfil, an excellent old gentleman, who smoked very long pipes and preached very

short sermons, I must not speak of him, or I might be tempted to tell the story of his life, which had its little romance, as most lives have between the ages of teetotum and tobacco. And at present I am concerned with quite another sort of clergyman—the Rev. Amos Barton, who did not come to Shepperton until long after Mr. Gilfil had departed this life—until after an interval in which Evangelicalism and the Catholic Question had begun to agitate the rustic mind with controversial debates. A Popish blacksmith had produced a strong Protestant reaction by declaring that, as soon as the Emancipation Bill was passed, he should do a great stroke of business in gridirons; and the disinclination of the Shepperton parishioners generally to dim the unique glory of St Lawrence, rendered the Church and Constitution an affair of their business and bosoms. A zealous Evangelical preacher had made the old sounding-board vibrate with quite a different sort of elocution from Mr. Gilfil's; the hymn-book had almost superseded the Old and New Versions; and the great square pews were crowded with new faces from distant corners of the parish—perhaps from Dissenting chapels.

You are not imagining, I hope, that Amos Barton was the incumbent of Shepperton. He was no such thing. Those were days when a man could hold three small livings, starve a curate a-piece on two of them, and live badly himself on the third. It was so with the Vicar of Shepperton; a vicar given to bricks and mortar, and thereby running into debt far away in a northern county—who executed his vicarial functions towards Shepperton by pocketing the sum of thirty-five pounds ten per annum, the net surplus remaining to him from the proceeds of that living, after the disbursement of eighty pounds as the annual stipend of his curate. And now, pray, can you solve me the following problem? Given a man with a wife and six children: let him be obliged always to exhibit himself when outside his own door in a suit of black broadcloth, such as will not

undermine the foundations of the Establishment by a paltry plebeian glossiness or an unseemly whiteness at the edges; in a snowy cravat, which is a serious investment of labour in the hemming, starching, and ironing departments; and in a hat which shows no symptom of taking to the hideous doctrine of expediency, and shaping itself according to circumstances; let him have a parish large enough to create an external necessity for abundant shoe-leather, and an internal necessity for abundant beef and mutton, as well as poor enough to require frequent priestly consolation in the shape of shillings and sixpences; and, lastly, let him be compelled, by his own pride and other people's, to dress his wife and children with gentility from bonnet-strings to shoe-strings. By what process of division can the sum of eighty pounds per annum be made to yield a quotient which will cover that man's weekly expenses? This was the problem presented by the position of the Rev. Amos Barton, as curate of Shepperton, rather more than twenty years ago.

What was thought of this problem, and of the man who had to work it out, by some of the well-to-do inhabitants of Shepperton, two years or more after Mr. Barton's arrival among them, you shall hear, if you will accompany me to Cross Farm, and to the fireside of Mrs. Patten, a childless old lady, who had got rich chiefly by the negative process of spending nothing. Mrs. Patten's passive accumulation of wealth, through all sorts of 'bad times', on the farm of which she had been sole tenant since her husband's death, her epigrammatic neighbour, Mrs. Hackit, sarcastically accounted for by supposing that 'sixpences grew on the bents of Cross Farm;' while Mr. Hackit, expressing his views more literally, reminded his wife that 'money breeds money'. Mr. and Mrs. Hackit, from the neighbouring farm, are Mrs. Patten's guests this evening; so is Mr. Pilgrim, the doctor from the nearest market-town, who, though occasionally affecting aristocratic airs, and giving late dinners with enigmatic side-dishes and poisonous port, is

never so comfortable as when he is relaxing his professional legs in one of those excellent farmhouses where the mice are sleek and the mistress sickly. And he is at this moment in clover.

For the flickering of Mrs. Patten's bright fire is reflected in her bright copper tea-kettle, the home-made muffins glisten with an inviting succulence, and Mrs. Patten's niece, a single lady of fifty, who has refused the most ineligible offers out of devotion to her aged aunt, is pouring the rich cream into the fragrant tea with a discreet liberality.

Reader! *did* you ever taste such a cup of tea as Miss Gibbs is this moment handing to Mr. Pilgrim? Do you know the dulcet strength, the animating blandness of tea sufficiently blended with real farmhouse cream? No—most likely you are a miserable town-bred reader, who think of cream as a thinnish white fluid, delivered in infinitesimal pennyworths down area steps; or perhaps, from a presentiment of calves' brains, you refrain from any lacteal addition, and rasp your tongue with unmitigated bohea. You have a vague idea of a milch cow as probably a white-plaster animal standing in a butterman's window, and you know nothing of the sweet history of genuine cream, such as Miss Gibbs's: how it was this morning in the udders of the large sleek beasts, as they stood lowing a patient entreaty under the milking-shed; how it fell with a pleasant rhythm into Betty's pail, sending a delicious incense into the cool air; how it was carried into that temple of moist cleanliness, the dairy, where it quietly separated itself from the meaner elements of milk, and lay in mellowed whiteness, ready for the skimming-dish which transferred it to Miss Gibbs's glass cream-jug. If I am right in my conjecture, you are unacquainted with the highest possibilities of tea; and Mr. Pilgrim, who is holding that cup in his hands, has an idea beyond you.

Mrs. Hackit declines cream; she has so long abstained from it with an eye to the weekly butter-money, that abstinence, wedded to habit, has begotten aversion. She is

a thin woman with a chronic liver-complaint, which would have secured her Mr. Pilgrim's entire regard and unreserved good word, even if he had not been in awe of her tongue, which was as sharp as his own lancet. She has brought her knitting—no frivolous fancy knitting, but a substantial woollen stocking; the click-click of her knitting-needles is the running accompaniment to all her conversation, and in her utmost enjoyment of spoiling a friend's self-satisfaction, she was never known to spoil a stocking. Mrs. Patten does not admire this excessive click-clicking activity. Quiescence in an easy-chair, under the sense of compound interest perpetually accumulating, has long seemed an ample function to her, and she does her malevolence gently. She is a pretty little old woman of eighty, with a close cap and tiny flat white curls round her face, as natty and unsoiled and invariable as the waxen image of a little old lady under a glass-case; once a lady's-maid, and married for her beauty. She used to adore her husband, and now she adores her money, cherishing a quiet blood-relation's hatred for her niece, Janet Gibbs, who, she knows, expects a large legacy, and whom she is determined to disappoint. Her money shall all go in a lump to a distant relation of her husband's, and Janet shall be saved the trouble of pretending to cry, by finding that she is left with a miserable pittance.

Mrs. Patten has more respect for her neighbour Mr. Hackit than for most people. Mr. Hackit is a shrewd substantial man, whose advice about crops is always worth listening to, and who is too well off to want to borrow money.

And now that we are snug and warm with this little tea-party, while it is freezing with February bitterness outside, we will listen to what they are talking about.

'So,' said Mr. Pilgrim, with his mouth only half empty of muffin, 'you had a row in Shepperton Church last Sunday. I was at Jim Hood's, the bassoon-man's, this morning, attending his wife, and he swears he'll be revenged on the

parson—a confounded, methodistical, meddlesome chap, who must be putting his finger in every pie. What was it all about?'

'O, a passill o' nonsense,' said Mr. Hackit, sticking one thumb between the buttons of his capacious waistcoat, and retaining a pinch of snuff with the other—for he was but moderately given to 'the cups that cheer but not inebriate', and had already finished his tea; 'they began to sing the wedding psalm for a new-married couple, as pretty a psalm an' as pretty a tune as any in the prayer-book. It's been sung for every new-married couple since I was a boy. And what can be better?' Here Mr. Hackit stretched out his left arm, threw back his head, and broke into melody—

'O what a happy thing it is,
And joyful for to see,
Brethren to dwell together in
Friendship and unity.

But Mr. Barton is all for th' hymns, and a sort o' music as I can't join in at all.'

'And so,' said Mr. Pilgrim, recalling Mr. Hackit from lyrical reminiscences to narrative, 'he called out Silence! did he? when he got into the pulpit; and gave a hymn out himself to some meeting-house tune?'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Hackit, stooping towards the candle to pick up a stitch, 'and turned as red as a turkey-cock. I often say, when he preaches about meekness, he gives himself a slap in the face. He's like me—he's got a temper of his own.'

'Rather a low-bred fellow, I think, Barton,' said Mr. Pilgrim, who hated the Reverend Amos for two reasons—because he had called in a new doctor, recently settled in Shepperton; and because, being himself a dabbler in drugs, he had the credit of having cured a patient of Mr. Pilgrim's. 'They say his father was a Dissenting shoemaker; and he's half a Dissenter himself. Why, doesn't he preach extempore in that cottage up here, of a Sunday evening?'

'Tchuh!'—this was Mr. Hackit's favourite interjection —'that preaching without book's no good, only when a man has a gift, and has the Bible at his fingers' ends. It was all very well for Parry—he'd a gift; and in my youth I've heard the Ranters out o' doors in Yorkshire go on for an hour or two on end, without ever sticking fast a minute. There was one clever chap, I remember, as used to say, "You're like the woodpigeon; it says do, do, do all day, and never sets about any work itself." That's bringing it home to people. But our parson's no gift at all that way; he can preach as good a sermon as need be heard when he writes it down. But when he tries to preach wi'out book, he rambles about, and doesn't stick to his text; and every now and then he flounders about like a sheep as has cast itself, and can't get on'ts legs again. You wouldn't like that, Mrs. Patten, if you was to go to church now?'

'Eh, dear,' said Mrs. Patten, falling back in her chair, and lifting up her little withered hands, 'what 'ud Mr. Gilfil say, if he was worthy to know the changes as have come about i' the Church these last ten years? I don't understand these new sort o' doctrines. When Mr. Barton comes to see me, he talks about nothing but my sins and my need o' marcy. Now, Mr. Hackit, I've never been a sinner. From the fust beginning, when I went into service, I al'ys did my duty by my emplyers. I was a good wife as any in the county—never aggravated my husband. The cheese-factor used to say my cheese was al'ys to be depended on. I've known women, as their cheeses swelled a shame to be seen, when their husbands had counted on the cheese-money to make up their rent; and yet they'd three gowns to my one. If I'm not to be saved, I know a many as are in a bad way. But it's well for me as I can't go to church any longer, for if th' old singers are to be done away with, there'll be nothing left as it was in Mr. Patten's time; and what's more, I hear you've settled to pull the church down and build it up new?'

Now the fact was that the Rev. Amos Barton, on his last visit to Mrs. Patten, had urged her to enlarge her promised

subscription of twenty pounds, representing to her that she was only a steward of her riches, and that she could not spend them more for the glory of God than by giving a heavy subscription towards the rebuilding of Shepperton Church—a practical precept which was not likely to smooth the way to her acceptance of his theological doctrine. Mr. Hackit, who had more doctrinal enlightenment than Mrs. Patten, had been a little shocked by the heathenism of her speech, and was glad of the new turn given to the subject by this question, addressed to him as church-warden and an authority in all parochial matters.

'Ah,' he answered, 'the parson's bothered us into it at last, and we're to begin pulling down this spring. But we haven't got money enough yet. I was for waiting till we'd made up the sum, and, for my part, I think the congregation's fell off o' late; though Mr. Barton says that's because there's been no room for the people when they've come. You see, the congregation got so large in Parry's time, the people stood in the aisles; but there's never any crowd now, as I can see.'

'Well,' said Mrs. Hackit, whose good-nature began to act now that it was a little in contradiction with the dominant tone of the conversation, '*I* like Mr. Barton. I think he's a good sort o' man, for all he's not overburthen'd i' th' upper storey; and his wife's as nice a lady-like woman as I'd wish to see. How nice she keeps her children! and little enough money to do't with; and a delicate creatur'—six children, and another a-coming. I don't know how they make both ends meet, I'm sure, now her aunt has left 'em. But I sent 'em a cheese and a sack o' potatoes last week; that's something towards filling the little mouths.'

'Ah!' said Mr. Hackit, 'and my wife makes Mr. Barton a good stiff glass o' brandy-and-water, when he comes into supper after his cottage preaching. The parson likes it; it puts a bit o' colour into 'is face, and makes him look a deal handsomer.'

This allusion to brandy-and-water suggested to Miss Gibbs the introduction of the liquor decanters, now that the tea was cleared away; for in bucolic society five-and-twenty years ago, the human animal of the male sex was understood to be perpetually athirst, and 'something to drink' was as necessary a 'condition of thought' as Time and Space.

'Now, that cottage preaching,' said Mr. Pilgrim, mixing himself a strong glass of 'cold without,' 'I was talking about it to our Parson Ely the other day, and he doesn't approve of it at all. He said it did as much harm as good to give a too familiar aspect to religious teaching. That was what Ely said—it does as much harm as good to give a too familiar aspect to religious teaching.'

Mr. Pilgrim generally spoke with an intermittent kind of splutter; indeed, one of his patients had observed that it was a pity such a clever man had a 'pediment' in his speech. But when he came to what he conceived the pith of his argument or the point of his joke, he mouthed out his words with slow emphasis; as a hen, when advertising her accouchement, passes at irregular intervals from pianissimo semiquavers to fortissimo crotchets. He thought this speech of Mr. Ely's particularly metaphysical and profound, and the more decisive of the question because it was a generality which represented no particulars to his mind.

'Well, I don't know about that,' said Mrs. Hackit, who had always the courage of her opinion, 'but I know, some of our labourers and stockingers as used never to come to church, come to the cottage, and that's better than never hearing anything good from week's end to week's end. And there's that Track Society's as Mr. Barton has begun—I've seen more o' the poor people with going tracking, than all the time I've lived in the parish before. And there'd need be something done among 'em; for the drinking at them Benefit Clubs is shameful. There's hardly a steady man or steady woman either, but what's a dissenter.'

During this speech of Mrs. Hackit's, Mr. Pilgrim had emitted a succession of little snorts, something like the treble grunts of a guinea-pig, which were always with him the sign of suppressed disapproval. But he never contradicted Mrs. Hackit—a woman whose 'pot-luck' was always to be relied on, and who on her side had unlimited reliance on bleeding, blistering, and draughts.

Mrs. Patten, however, felt equal disapprobation, and had no reasons for suppressing it.

'Well,' she remarked, 'I've heared of no good from interfering with one's neighbours, poor or rich. And I hate the sight o' women going about trapesing from house to house in all weathers, wet or dry, and coming in with their petticoats dagged and their shoes all over mud. Janet wanted to join in the tracking, but I told her I'd have nobody tracking out o' my house; when I'm gone, she may do as she likes. I never dagged my petticoats in *my* life, and I've no opinion o' that sort o' religion.'

'No,' said Mr. Hackit, who was fond of soothing the acerbities of the feminine mind with a jocose compliment, 'you held your petticoats so high, to show your tight ankles: it isn't everybody as likes to show her ankles.'

This joke met with general acceptance, even from the snubbed Janet, whose ankles were only tight in the sense of looking extremely squeezed by her boots. But Janet seemed always to identify herself with her aunt's personality, holding her own under protest.

Under cover of the general laughter the gentlemen replenished their glasses, Mr. Pilgrim attempting to give his the character of a stirrup-cup by observing that he 'must be going'. Miss Gibbs seized this opportunity of telling Mrs. Hackit that she suspected Betty, the dairymaid, of frying the best bacon for the shepherd, when he sat up with her to 'help brew'; whereupon Mrs. Hackit replied that she had always thought Betty false; and Mrs. Patten said there was no bacon stolen when *she* was able to manage. Mr. Hackit, who often complained that he 'never saw the like to women

with their maids—he never had any trouble with his men', avoided listening to this discussion, by raising the question of vetches with Mr. Pilgrim. The stream of conversation had thus diverged: and no more was said about the Rev. Amos Barton, who is the main object of interest to us just now. So we may leave Cross Farm without waiting till Mrs. Hackit, resolutely donning her clogs and wrappings, renders it incumbent on Mr. Pilgrim also to fulfil his frequent threat of going.

Chapter 2

It was happy for the Rev. Amos Barton that he did not, like us, overhear the conversation recorded in the last chapter. Indeed, what mortal is there of us, who would find his satisfaction enhanced by an opportunity of comparing the picture he presents to himself of his own doings, with the picture they make on the mental retina of his neighbours? We are poor plants buoyed up by the air-vessels of our own conceit: alas for us, if we get a few pinches that empty us of that windy self-subsistence! The very capacity for good would go out of us. For, tell the most impassioned orator, suddenly, that his wig is awry, or his shirt-lap hanging out, and that he is tickling people by the oddity of his person, instead of thrilling them by the energy of his periods, and you would infallibly dry up the spring of his eloquence. That is a deep and wide saying, that no miracle can be wrought without faith—without the worker's faith in himself, as well as the recipient's faith in him. And the greater part of the worker's faith in himself is made up of the faith that others believe in him.

Let me be persuaded that my neighbour Jenkins considers me a blockhead, and I shall never shine in conversation with him any more. Let me discover that the lovely Phoebe thinks my squint intolerable, and I shall never be able to fix her blandly with my disengaged eye

again. Thank heaven, then, that a little illusion is left to us, to enable us to be useful and agreeable—that we don't know exactly what our friends think of us—that the world is not made of looking-glass, to show us just the figure we are making, and just what is going on behind our backs! By the help of dear friendly illusion, we are able to dream that we are charming and our faces wear a becoming air of self-possession; we are able to dream that other men admire our talents—and our benignity is undisturbed; we are able to dream that we are doing much good—and we do a little. Thus it was with Amos Barton on that very Thursday evening, when he was the subject of the conversation at Cross Farm. He had been dining at Mr. Farquhar's, the secondary squire of the parish, and, stimulated by unwonted gravies and port-wine, had been delivering his opinion on affairs parochial and otherwise with considerable animation. And he was now returning home in the moonlight—a little chill, it is true, for he had just now no greatcoat compatible with clerical dignity, and a fur boa round one's neck, with a waterproof cape over one's shoulders, doesn't frighten away the cold from one's legs; but entirely unsuspicious, not only of Mr. Hackit's estimate of his oratorical powers, but also of the critical remarks passed on him by the Misses Farquhar as soon as the drawing-room door had closed behind him. Miss Julia had observed that she *never* heard any one sniff so frightfully as Mr. Barton did—she had a great mind to offer him her pocket-handkerchief; and Miss Arabella wondered why he always said he was going *for* to do a thing. He, excellent man! was meditating fresh pastoral exertions on the morrow; he would set on foot his lending library; in which he had introduced some books that would be a pretty sharp blow to the Dissenters—one especially, purporting to be written by a working man who, out of pure zeal for the welfare of his class, took the trouble to warn them in this way against those hypocritical thieves, the Dissenting preachers. The Rev. Amos Barton profoundly believed in

the existence of that working man, and had thoughts of writing to him. Dissent, he considered, would have its head bruised in Shepperton, for did he not attack it in two ways? He preached Low-Church doctrine—as evangelical as anything to be heard in the Independent Chapel; and he made a High-Church assertion of ecclesiastical powers and functions. Clearly, the Dissenters would feel that 'the parson' was too many for them. Nothing like a man who combines shrewdness with energy. The wisdom of the serpent, Mr. Barton considered, was one of his strong points.

Look at him as he winds through the little churchyard! The silver light that falls aslant on church and tomb, enables you to see his slim black figure, made all the slimmer by tight pantaloons, as it flits past the pale gravestones. He walks with a quick step, and is now rapping with sharp decision at the vicarage door. It is opened without delay by the nurse, cook, and housemaid, all at once—that is to say, by the robust maid-of-all-work, Nanny; and as Mr. Barton hangs up his hat in the passage, you see that a narrow face of no particular complexion—even the small-pox that has attacked it seems to have been of a mongrel, indefinite kind—with features of no particular shape, and an eye of no particular expression is surmounted by a slope of baldness gently rising from brow to crown. You judge him, rightly, to be about forty. The house is quiet, for it is half-past ten, and the children have long been gone to bed. He opens the sitting-room door, but instead of seeing his wife, as he expected, stitching with the nimblest of fingers by the light of one candle, he finds her dispensing with the light of a candle altogether. She is softly pacing up and down by the red firelight, holding in her arms little Walter, the year-old baby, who looks over her shoulder with large wide-open eyes, while the patient mother pats his back with her soft hand, and glances with a sigh at the heap of large and small stockings lying unmended on the table.

She was a lovely woman—Mrs. Amos Barton, a large, fair, gentle Madonna, with thick, close, chestnut curls beside her well-rounded cheeks, and with large, tender, short-sighted eyes. The flowing lines of her tall figure made the limpest dress look graceful, and her old frayed black silk seemed to repose on her bust and limbs with a placid elegance and sense of distinction, in strong contrast with the uneasy sense of being no fit, that seemed to express itself in the rustling of Mrs. Farquhar's *gros de Naples*. The caps she wore would have been pronounced, when off her head, utterly heavy and hideous—for in those days even fashionable caps were large and floppy; but surmounting her long arched neck, and mingling their borders of cheap lace and ribbon with her chestnut curls, they seemed miracles of successful millinery. Among strangers she was shy and tremulous as a girl of fifteen; she blushed crimson if any one appealed to her opinion; yet that tall, graceful, substantial presence was so imposing in its mildness, that men spoke to her with an agreeable sensation of timidity.

Soothing, unspeakable charm of gentle womanhood! which supersedes all acquisitions, all accomplishments. You would never have asked, at any period of Mrs. Amos Barton's life, if she sketched or played the piano. You would even perhaps have been rather scandalized if she had descended from the serene dignity of *being* to the assiduous unrest of *doing*. Happy the man, you would have thought, whose eye will rest on her in the pauses of his fireside reading—whose hot aching forehead will be soothed by the contact of her cool soft hand—who will recover himself from dejection at his mistakes and failures in the loving light of her unreproaching eyes! You would not, perhaps, have anticipated that this bliss would fall to the share of precisely such a man as Amos Barton, whom you have already surmised not to have the refined sensibilities for which you might have imagined Mrs. Barton's qualities to be destined by pre-established harmony. But I, for one, do not grudge Amos Barton this

sweet wife. I have all my life had a sympathy for mongrel ungainly dogs, who are nobody's pets; and I would rather surprise one of them by a pat and a pleasant morsel, than meet the condescending advances of the loveliest Skye-terrier who has his cushion by my lady's chair. That, to be sure, is not the way of the world: if it happens to see a fellow of fine proportions and aristocratic mien, who makes no *faux pas*, and wins golden opinions from all sorts of men, it straightway picks out for him the loveliest of unmarried women, and says, *There* would be a proper match! Not at all, say I: let that successful, well-shapen, discreet and able gentleman put up with something less than the best in the matrimonial department; and let the sweet woman go to make sunshine and a soft pillow for the poor devil whose legs are not models, whose efforts are often blunders, and who in general gets more kicks than halfpence. She—the sweet woman—will like it as well; for her sublime capacity of loving will have all the more scope; and I venture to say, Mrs. Barton's nature would never have grown half so angelic if she had married the man you would perhaps have had in your eye for her—a man with sufficient income and abundant personal eclat. Besides, Amos was an affectionate husband, and, in his way, valued his wife as his best treasure.

But now he has shut the door behind him, and said, 'Well, Milly!'

'Well, dear!' was the corresponding greeting, made eloquent by a smile.

'So that young rascal won't go to sleep! Can't you give him to Nanny?'

'Why, Nanny has been busy ironing this evening; but I think I'll take him to her now.' And Mrs. Barton glided towards the kitchen, while her husband ran up-stairs to put on his maize-coloured dressing-gown, in which costume he was quietly filling his long pipe when his wife returned to the sitting-room. Maize is a colour that decidedly did *not* suit his complexion, and it is one that soon soils; why, then,

did Mr. Barton select it for domestic wear? Perhaps because he had a knack of hitting on the wrong thing in garb as well as in grammar.

Mrs. Barton now lighted her candle, and seated herself before her heap of stockings. She had something disagreeable to tell her husband, but she would not enter on it at once. 'Have you had a nice evening, dear?'

'Yes, pretty well. Ely was there to dinner, but went away rather early. Miss Arabella is setting her cap at him with a vengeance. But I don't think he's much smitten. I've a notion Ely's engaged to some one at a distance, and will astonish all the ladies who are languishing for him here, by bringing home his bride one of these days. Ely's a sly dog; he'll like that.'

'Did the Farquhars say anything about the singing last Sunday?'

'Yes; Farquhar said he thought it was time there was some improvement in the choir. But he was rather scandalized at my setting the tune of "Lydia." He says he's always hearing it as he passes the Independent meeting.' Here Mr. Barton laughed—he had a way of laughing at criticisms that other people thought damaging—and thereby showed the remainder of a set of teeth which, like the remnants of the Old Guard, were few in number, and very much the worse for wear. 'But,' he continued, 'Mrs. Farquhar talked the most about Mr. Bridmain and the Countess. She has taken up all the gossip about them, and wanted to convert me to her opinion, but I told her pretty strongly what I thought.'

'Dear me! why will people take so much pains to find out evil about others? I have had a note from the Countess since you went, asking us to dine with them on Friday.'

Here Mrs. Barton reached the note from the mantelpiece, and gave it to her husband. We will look over his shoulder while he reads it:—

"Sweetest Milly, Bring your lovely face with your husband to dine with us on Friday at seven—do. If not, I will be sulky

with you till Sunday, when I shall be obliged to see you, and shall long to kiss you that very moment. Yours, according to your answer,

Caroline Czerlaski."

'Just like her, isn't it?' said Mrs. Barton. 'I suppose we can go?'

'Yes; I have no engagement. The Clerical Meeting is tomorrow, you know.'

'And, dear, Woods the butcher called, to say he must have some money next week. He has a payment to make up.'

This announcement made Mr. Barton thoughtful. He puffed more rapidly, and looked at the fire.

'I think I must ask Hackit to lend me twenty pounds, for it is nearly two months till Lady-day, and we can't give Woods our last shilling.'

'I hardly like you to ask Mr. Hackit, dear—he and Mrs. Hackit have been so very kind to us; they have sent us so many things lately.'

'Then I must ask Oldinport. I'm going to write to him tomorrow morning, for to tell him the arrangement I've been thinking of about having service in the workhouse while the church is being enlarged. If he agrees to attend service there once or twice, the other people will come. Net the large fish, and you're sure to have the small fry.'

'I wish we could do without borrowing money, and yet I don't see how we can. Poor Fred must have some new shoes; I couldn't let him go to Mrs. Bond's yesterday because his toes were peeping out, dear child! and I can't let him walk anywhere except in the garden. He must have a pair before Sunday. Really, boots and shoes are the greatest trouble of my life. Everything else one can turn and turn about, and make old look like new; but there's no coaxing boots and shoes to look better than they are.'

Mrs. Barton was playfully undervaluing her skill in metamorphosing boots and shoes. She had at that moment on her feet a pair of slippers which had long ago lived through the prunella phase of their existence, and were

now running a respectable career as black silk slippers, having been neatly covered with that material by Mrs. Barton's own neat fingers. Wonderful fingers those! they were never empty; for if she went to spend a few hours with a friendly parishioner, out came her thimble and a piece of calico or muslin, which, before she left, had become a mysterious little garment with all sorts of hemmed ins and outs. She was even trying to persuade her husband to leave off tight pantaloons, because if he would wear the ordinary gun-cases, she knew she could make them so well that no one would suspect the sex of the tailor.

But by this time Mr. Barton has finished his pipe, the candle begins to burn low, and Mrs. Barton goes to see if Nanny has succeeded in lulling Walter to sleep. Nanny is that moment putting him in the little cot by his mother's bedside; the head, with its thin wavelets of brown hair, indents the little pillow; and a tiny, waxen, dimpled fist hides the rosy lips, for baby is given to the infantile peccadillo of thumb-sucking. So Nanny could now join in the short evening prayer, and all could go to bed. Mrs. Barton carried up-stairs the remainder of her heap of stockings, and laid them on a table close to her bedside, where also she placed a warm shawl, removing her candle, before she put it out, to a tin socket fixed at the head of her bed. Her body was very weary, but her heart was not heavy, in spite of Mr. Woods the butcher, and the transitory nature of shoe-leather; for her heart so overflowed with love, she felt sure she was near a fountain of love that would care for husband and babes better than she could foresee; so she was soon asleep. But about half-past five o'clock in the morning, if there were any angels watching round her bed —and angels might be glad of such an office they saw Mrs. Barton rise up quietly, careful not to disturb the slumbering Amos, who was snoring the snore of the just, light her candle, prop herself upright with the pillows, throw the warm shawl round her shoulders, and renew her attack on the heap of undarned stockings. She darned away until she