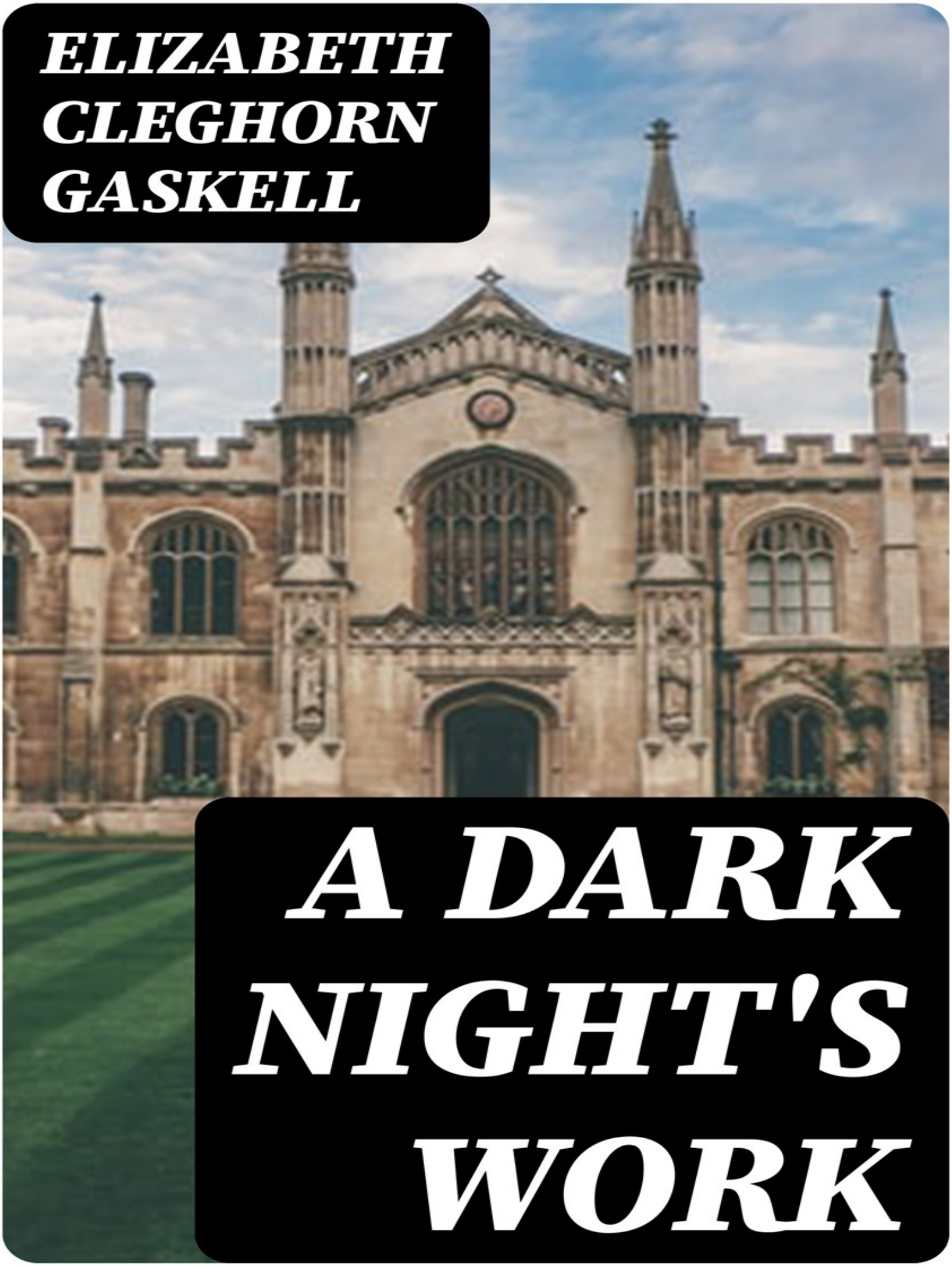
ELIZABETH CLEGHORN GASKELL



A DARK NIGHT'S WORK

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

A Dark Night's Work

EAN 8596547173373

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

Table of Contents

In the county town of a certain shire there lived (about forty years ago) one Mr. Wilkins, a conveyancing attorney of considerable standing.

The certain shire was but a small county, and the principal town in it contained only about four thousand inhabitants; so in saying that Mr. Wilkins was the principal lawyer in Hamley, I say very little, unless I add that he transacted all the legal business of the gentry for twenty miles round. His grandfather had established the connection; his father had consolidated and strengthened it, and, indeed, by his wise and upright conduct, as well as by his professional skill, had obtained for himself the position of confidential friend to many of the surrounding families of distinction. He visited among them in a way which no mere lawyer had ever done before; dined at their tables—he alone, not accompanied by his wife, be it observed; rode to the meet occasionally as if by accident, although he was as well mounted as any squire among them, and was often persuaded (after a little coquetting about “professional engagements,” and “being wanted at the office”) to have a run with his clients; nay, once or twice he forgot his usual caution, was first in at the death, and rode home with the brush. But in general he knew his place; as his place was held to be in that aristocratic county, and in those days. Nor let be supposed that he was in any way a toadeater. He respected himself too much for that. He would give the most unpalatable advice, if need were; would counsel an unsparing reduction of expenditure to an extravagant man; would recommend such an abatement of family pride as paved the way for one

or two happy marriages in some instances; nay, what was the most likely piece of conduct of all to give offence forty years ago, he would speak up for an unjustly-used tenant; and that with so much temperate and well-timed wisdom and good feeling, that he more than once gained his point. He had one son, Edward. This boy was the secret joy and pride of his father's heart. For himself he was not in the least ambitious, but it did cost him a hard struggle to acknowledge that his own business was too lucrative, and brought in too large an income, to pass away into the hands of a stranger, as it would do if he indulged his ambition for his son by giving him a college education and making him into a barrister. This determination on the more prudent side of the argument took place while Edward was at Eton. The lad had, perhaps, the largest allowance of pocket-money of any boy at school; and he had always looked forward to going to Christ Church along with his fellows, the sons of the squires, his father's employers. It was a severe mortification to him to find that his destiny was changed, and that he had to return to Hamley to be articled to his father, and to assume the hereditary subservient position to lads whom he had licked in the play-ground, and beaten at learning.

His father tried to compensate him for the disappointment by every indulgence which money could purchase. Edward's horses were even finer than those of his father; his literary tastes were kept up and fostered, by his father's permission to form an extensive library, for which purpose a noble room was added to Mr. Wilkins's already extensive house in the suburbs of Hamley. And after his year of legal study in London his father sent him to make the grand tour, with something very like carte blanche as to expenditure, to judge from the packages which were sent home from various parts of the Continent.

At last he came home—came back to settle as his father’s partner at Hamley. He was a son to be proud of, and right down proud was old Mr. Wilkins of his handsome, accomplished, gentlemanly lad. For Edward was not one to be spoilt by the course of indulgence he had passed through; at least, if it had done him an injury, the effects were at present hidden from view. He had no vulgar vices; he was, indeed, rather too refined for the society he was likely to be thrown into, even supposing that society to consist of the highest of his father’s employers. He was well read, and an artist of no mean pretensions. Above all, “his heart was in the right place,” as his father used to observe. Nothing could exceed the deference he always showed to him. His mother had long been dead.

I do not know whether it was Edward’s own ambition or his proud father’s wishes that had led him to attend the Hamley assemblies. I should conjecture the latter, for Edward had of himself too much good taste to wish to intrude into any society. In the opinion of all the shire, no society had more reason to consider itself select than that which met at every full moon in the Hamley assembly-room, an excrescence built on to the principal inn in the town by the joint subscription of all the county families. Into those choice and mysterious precincts no towns person was ever allowed to enter; no professional man might set his foot therein; no infantry officer saw the interior of that ball, or that card-room. The old original subscribers would fain have had a man prove his sixteen quarterings before he might make his bow to the queen of the night; but the old original founders of the Hamley assemblies were dropping off; minuets had vanished with them, country dances had died away; quadrilles were in high vogue—nay, one or two of the high magnates of ---shire were trying to introduce waltzing, as they had seen it in London, where it had come in with the visit of the allied sovereigns, when Edward Wilkins made his

début on these boards. He had been at many splendid assemblies abroad, but still the little old ballroom attached to the George Inn in his native town was to him a place grander and more awful than the most magnificent saloons he had seen in Paris or Rome. He laughed at himself for this unreasonable feeling of awe; but there it was notwithstanding. He had been dining at the house of one of the lesser gentry, who was under considerable obligations to his father, and who was the parent of eight “muckle-mou’ed” daughters, so hardly likely to oppose much aristocratic resistance to the elder Mr. Wilkins’s clearly implied wish that Edward should be presented at the Hamley assembly-rooms. But many a squire glowered and looked black at the introduction of Wilkins the attorney’s son into the sacred precincts; and perhaps there would have been much more mortification than pleasure in this assembly to the young man, had it not been for an incident that occurred pretty late in the evening. The lord-lieutenant of the county usually came with a large party to the Hamley assemblies once in a season; and this night he was expected, and with him a fashionable duchess and her daughters. But time wore on, and they did not make their appearance. At last there was a rustling and a bustling, and in sailed the superb party. For a few minutes dancing was stopped; the earl led the duchess to a sofa; some of their acquaintances came up to speak to them; and then the quadrilles were finished in rather a flat manner. A country dance followed, in which none of the lord-lieutenant’s party joined; then there was a consultation, a request, an inspection of the dancers, a message to the orchestra, and the band struck up a waltz; the duchess’s daughters flew off to the music, and some more young ladies seemed ready to follow, but, alas! there was a lack of gentlemen acquainted with the new-fashioned dance. One of the stewards bethought him of young Wilkins, only just returned from the Continent. Edward was a beautiful dancer, and waltzed to

admiration. For his next partner he had one of the Lady ---s; for the duchess, to whom the—shire squires and their little county politics and contempts were alike unknown, saw no reason why her lovely Lady Sophy should not have a good partner, whatever his pedigree might be, and begged the stewards to introduce Mr. Wilkins to her. After this night his fortune was made with the young ladies of the Hamley assemblies. He was not unpopular with the mammas; but the heavy squires still looked at him askance, and the heirs (whom he had licked at Eton) called him an upstart behind his back.

CHAPTER II.

Table of Contents

It was not a satisfactory situation. Mr. Wilkins had given his son an education and tastes beyond his position. He could not associate with either profit or pleasure with the doctor or the brewer of Hamley; the vicar was old and deaf, the curate a raw young man, half frightened at the sound of his own voice. Then, as to matrimony—for the idea of his marriage was hardly more present in Edward's mind than in that of his father—he could scarcely fancy bringing home any one of the young ladies of Hamley to the elegant mansion, so full of suggestion and association to an educated person, so inappropriate a dwelling for an ignorant, uncouth, ill-brought-up girl. Yet Edward was fully aware, if his fond father was not, that of all the young ladies who were glad enough of him as a partner at the Hamley assemblies, there was not of them but would have considered herself affronted by an offer of marriage from an attorney, the son and grandson of attorneys. The young man had perhaps received many a slight and mortification pretty quietly during these years, which yet told upon his character in after life. Even at this very time they were having their effect. He was of too sweet a disposition to show resentment, as many men would have done. But nevertheless he took a secret pleasure in the power which his father's money gave him. He would buy an expensive horse after five minutes' conversation as to the price, about which a needy heir of one of the proud county families had been haggling for three weeks. His dogs were from the best

kennels in England, no matter at what cost; his guns were the newest and most improved make; and all these were expenses on objects which were among those of daily envy to the squires and squires' sons around. They did not much care for the treasures of art, which report said were being accumulated in Mr. Wilkins's house. But they did covet the horses and hounds he possessed, and the young man knew that they coveted, and rejoiced in it.

By-and-by he formed a marriage, which went as near as marriages ever do towards pleasing everybody. He was desperately in love with Miss Lamotte, so he was delighted when she consented to be his wife. His father was delighted in his delight, and, besides, was charmed to remember that Miss Lamotte's mother had been Sir Frank Holster's younger sister, and that, although her marriage had been disowned by her family, as beneath her in rank, yet no one could efface her name out of the Baronetage, where Lettice, youngest daughter of Sir Mark Holster, born 1772, married H. Lamotte, 1799, died 1810, was duly chronicled. She had left two children, a boy and a girl, of whom their uncle, Sir Frank, took charge, as their father was worse than dead—an outlaw whose name was never mentioned. Mark Lamotte was in the army; Lettice had a dependent position in her uncle's family; not intentionally made more dependent than was rendered necessary by circumstances, but still dependent enough to grate on the feelings of a sensitive girl, whose natural susceptibilty to slights was redoubled by the constant recollection of her father's disgrace. As Mr. Wilkins well knew, Sir Frank was considerably involved; but it was with very mixed feelings that he listened to the suit which would provide his penniless niece with a comfortable, not to say luxurious, home, and with a handsome, accomplished young man of unblemished character for a husband. He said one or two bitter and insolent things to Mr. Wilkins, even while he was giving his

consent to the match; that was his temper, his proud, evil temper; but he really and permanently was satisfied with the connection, though he would occasionally turn round on his nephew-in-law, and sting him with a covert insult, as to his want of birth, and the inferior position which he held, forgetting, apparently, that his own brother-in-law and Lettice's father might be at any moment brought to the bar of justice if he attempted to re-enter his native country.

Edward was annoyed at all this; Lettice resented it. She loved her husband dearly, and was proud of him, for she had discernment enough to see how superior he was in every way to her cousins, the young Holsters, who borrowed his horses, drank his wines, and yet had caught their father's habit of sneering at his profession. Lettice wished that Edward would content himself with a purely domestic life, would let himself drop out of the company of the ---shire squirearchy, and find his relaxation with her, in their luxurious library, or lovely drawing-room, so full of white gleaming statues, and gems of pictures. But, perhaps, this was too much to expect of any man, especially of one who felt himself fitted in many ways to shine in society, and who was social by nature. Sociality in that county at that time meant conviviality. Edward did not care for wine, and yet he was obliged to drink—and by-and-by he grew to pique himself on his character as a judge of wine. His father by this time was dead; dead, happy old man, with a contented heart—his affairs flourishing, his poorer neighbours loving him, his richer respecting him, his son and daughter-in-law, the most affectionate and devoted that ever man had, and his healthy conscience at peace with his God.

Lettice could have lived to herself and her husband and children. Edward daily required more and more the stimulus of society. His wife wondered how he could care to accept dinner invitations from people who treated him as "Wilkins

the attorney, a very good sort of fellow," as they introduced him to strangers who might be staying in the country, but who had no power to appreciate the taste, the talents, the impulsive artistic nature which she held so dear. She forgot that by accepting such invitations Edward was occasionally brought into contact with people not merely of high conventional, but of high intellectual rank; that when a certain amount of wine had dissipated his sense of inferiority of rank and position, he was a brilliant talker, a man to be listened to and admired even by wandering London statesmen, professional diners-out, or any great authors who might find themselves visitors in a ---shire country-house. What she would have had him share from the pride of her heart, she should have warned him to avoid from the temptations to sinful extravagance which it led him into. He had begun to spend more than he ought, not in intellectual—though that would have been wrong—but in purely sensual things. His wines, his table, should be such as no squire's purse or palate could command. His dinner-parties—small in number, the viands rare and delicate in quality, and sent up to table by an Italian cook—should be such as even the London stars should notice with admiration. He would have Lettice dressed in the richest materials, the most delicate lace; jewellery, he said, was beyond their means; glancing with proud humility at the diamonds of the elder ladies, and the alloyed gold of the younger. But he managed to spend as much on his wife's lace as would have bought many a set of inferior jewellery. Lettice well became it all. If as people said, her father had been nothing but a French adventurer, she bore traces of her nature in her grace, her delicacy, her fascinating and elegant ways of doing all things. She was made for society; and yet she hated it. And one day she went out of it altogether and for evermore. She had been well in the morning when Edward went down to his office in Hamley. At noon he was sent for by hurried trembling messengers.

When he got home breathless and uncomprehending, she was past speech. One glance from her lovely loving black eyes showed that she recognised him with the passionate yearning that had been one of the characteristics of her love through life. There was no word passed between them. He could not speak, any more than could she. He knelt down by her. She was dying; she was dead; and he knelt on immovable. They brought him his eldest child, Ellinor, in utter despair what to do in order to rouse him. They had no thought as to the effect on her, hitherto shut up in the nursery during this busy day of confusion and alarm. The child had no idea of death, and her father, kneeling and tearless, was far less an object of surprise or interest to her than her mother, lying still and white, and not turning her head to smile at her darling.

“Mamma! mamma!” cried the child, in shapeless terror. But the mother never stirred; and the father hid his face yet deeper in the bedclothes, to stifle a cry as if a sharp knife had pierced his heart. The child forced her impetuous way from her attendants, and rushed to the bed. Undeterred by deadly cold or stony immobility, she kissed the lips and stroked the glossy raven hair, murmuring sweet words of wild love, such as had passed between the mother and child often and often when no witnesses were by; and altogether seemed so nearly beside herself in an agony of love and terror, that Edward arose, and softly taking her in his arms, bore her away, lying back like one dead (so exhausted was she by the terrible emotion they had forced on her childish heart), into his study, a little room opening out of the grand library, where on happy evenings, never to come again, he and his wife were wont to retire to have coffee together, and then perhaps stroll out of the glass-door into the open air, the shrubbery, the fields—never more to be trodden by those dear feet. What passed between father and child in this seclusion none could tell. Late in the evening Ellinor’s

supper was sent for, and the servant who brought it in saw the child lying as one dead in her father’s arms, and before he left the room watched his master feeding her, the girl of six years of age, with as tender care as if she had been a baby of six months.

CHAPTER III.

Table of Contents

From that time the tie between father and daughter grew very strong and tender indeed. Ellinor, it is true, divided her affection between her baby sister and her papa; but he, caring little for babies, had only a theoretic regard for his younger child, while the elder absorbed all his love. Every day that he dined at home Ellinor was placed opposite to him while he ate his late dinner; she sat where her mother had done during the meal, although she had dined and even supped some time before on the more primitive nursery fare. It was half pitiful, half amusing, to see the little girl's grave, thoughtful ways and modes of speech, as if trying to act up to the dignity of her place as her father's companion, till sometimes the little head nodded off to slumber in the middle of lisping some wise little speech. "Old-fashioned," the nurses called her, and prophesied that she would not live long in consequence of her old-fashionedness. But instead of the fulfilment of this prophecy, the fat bright baby was seized with fits, and was well, ill, and dead in a day! Ellinor's grief was something alarming, from its quietness and concealment. She waited till she was left—as she thought—alone at nights, and then sobbed and cried her passionate cry for "Baby, baby, come back to me—come back;" till every one feared for the health of the frail little girl whose childish affections had had to stand two such shocks. Her father put aside all business, all pleasure of every kind, to win his darling from her grief. No mother

could have done more, no tenderest nurse done half so much as Mr. Wilkins then did for Ellinor.

If it had not been for him she would have just died of her grief. As it was, she overcame it—but slowly, wearily—hardly letting herself love anyone for some time, as if she instinctively feared lest all her strong attachments should find a sudden end in death. Her love—thus dammed up into a small space—at last burst its banks, and overflowed on her father. It was a rich reward to him for all his care of her, and he took delight—perhaps a selfish delight—in all the many pretty ways she perpetually found of convincing him, if he had needed conviction, that he was ever the first object with her. The nurse told him that half an hour or so before the earliest time at which he could be expected home in the evenings, Miss Ellinor began to fold up her doll’s things and lull the inanimate treasure to sleep. Then she would sit and listen with an intensity of attention for his footstep. Once the nurse had expressed some wonder at the distance at which Ellinor could hear her father’s approach, saying that she had listened and could not hear a sound, to which Ellinor had replied:

“Of course you cannot; he is not your papa!”

Then, when he went away in the morning, after he had kissed her, Ellinor would run to a certain window from which she could watch him up the lane, now hidden behind a hedge, now reappearing through an open space, again out of sight, till he reached a great old beech-tree, where for an instant more she saw him. And then she would turn away with a sigh, sometimes reassuring her unspoken fears by saying softly to herself,

“He will come again to-night.”

Mr. Wilkins liked to feel his child dependent on him for all her pleasures. He was even a little jealous of anyone who devised a treat or conferred a present, the first news of which did not come from or through him.

At last it was necessary that Ellinor should have some more instruction than her good old nurse could give. Her father did not care to take upon himself the office of teacher, which he thought he foresaw would necessitate occasional blame, an occasional exercise of authority, which might possibly render him less idolized by his little girl; so he commissioned Lady Holster to choose out one among her many *protégées* for a governess to his daughter. Now, Lady Holster, who kept a sort of amateur county register-office, was only too glad to be made of use in this way; but when she inquired a little further as to the sort of person required, all she could extract from Mr. Wilkins was:

“You know the kind of education a lady should have, and will, I am sure, choose a governess for Ellinor better than I could direct you. Only, please, choose some one who will not marry me, and who will let Ellinor go on making my tea, and doing pretty much what she likes, for she is so good they need not try to make her better, only to teach her what a lady should know.”

Miss Monro was selected—a plain, intelligent, quiet woman of forty—and it was difficult to decide whether she or Mr. Wilkins took the most pains to avoid each other, acting with regard to Ellinor, pretty much like the famous Adam and Eve in the weather-glass: when the one came out the other went in. Miss Monro had been tossed about and overworked quite enough in her life not to value the privilege and indulgence of her evenings to herself, her comfortable schoolroom, her quiet cozy teas, her book, or her letter-writing afterwards. By mutual agreement she did not interfere with Ellinor and her ways and occupations on

the evenings when the girl had not her father for companion; and these occasions became more and more frequent as years passed on, and the deep shadow was lightened which the sudden death that had visited his household had cast over him. As I have said before, he was always a popular man at dinner-parties. His amount of intelligence and accomplishment was rare in ---shire, and if it required more wine than formerly to bring his conversation up to the desired point of range and brilliancy, wine was not an article spared or grudged at the county dinner-tables. Occasionally his business took him up to London. Hurried as these journeys might be, he never returned without a new game, a new toy of some kind, to “make home pleasant to his little maid,” as he expressed himself.

He liked, too, to see what was doing in art, or in literature; and as he gave pretty extensive orders for anything he admired, he was almost sure to be followed down to Hamley by one or two packages or parcels, the arrival and opening of which began soon to form the pleasant epochs in Ellinor’s grave though happy life.

The only person of his own standing with whom Mr. Wilkins kept up any intercourse in Hamley was the new clergyman, a bachelor, about his own age, a learned man, a fellow of his college, whose first claim on Mr. Wilkins’s attention was the fact that he had been travelling-bachelor for his university, and had consequently been on the Continent about the very same two years that Mr. Wilkins had been there; and although they had never met, yet they had many common acquaintances and common recollections to talk over of this period, which, after all, had been about the most bright and hopeful of Mr. Wilkins’s life.

Mr. Ness had an occasional pupil; that is to say, he never put himself out of the way to obtain pupils, but did not

refuse the entreaties sometimes made to him that he would prepare a young man for college, by allowing the said young man to reside and read with him. “Ness’s men” took rather high honours, for the tutor, too indolent to find out work for himself, had a certain pride in doing well the work that was found for him.

When Ellinor was somewhere about fourteen, a young Mr. Corbet came to be pupil to Mr. Ness. Her father always called on the young men reading with the clergyman, and asked them to his house. His hospitality had in course of time lost its *recherché* and elegant character, but was always generous, and often profuse. Besides, it was in his character to like the joyous, thoughtless company of the young better than that of the old—given the same amount of refinement and education in both.

Mr. Corbet was a young man of very good family, from a distant county. If his character had not been so grave and deliberate, his years would only have entitled him to be called a boy, for he was but eighteen at the time when he came to read with Mr. Ness. But many men of five-and-twenty have not reflected so deeply as this young Mr. Corbet already had. He had considered and almost matured his plan for life; had ascertained what objects he desired most to accomplish in the dim future, which is to many at his age only a shapeless mist; and had resolved on certain steady courses of action by which such objects were most likely to be secured. A younger son, his family connections and family interest pre-arranged a legal career for him; and it was in accordance with his own tastes and talents. All, however, which his father hoped for him was, that he might be able to make an income sufficient for a gentleman to live on. Old Mr. Corbet was hardly to be called ambitious, or, if he were, his ambition was limited to views for the eldest son. But Ralph intended to be a distinguished

lawyer, not so much for the vision of the woolsack, which I suppose dances before the imagination of every young lawyer, as for the grand intellectual exercise, and consequent power over mankind, that distinguished lawyers may always possess if they choose. A seat in Parliament, statesmanship, and all the great scope for a powerful and active mind that lay on each side of such a career—these were the objects which Ralph Corbet set before himself. To take high honours at college was the first step to be accomplished; and in order to achieve this Ralph had, not persuaded—persuasion was a weak instrument which he despised—but gravely reasoned his father into consenting to pay the large sum which Mr. Ness expected with a pupil. The good-natured old squire was rather pressed for ready money, but sooner than listen to an argument instead of taking his nap after dinner he would have yielded anything. But this did not satisfy Ralph; his father's reason must be convinced of the desirability of the step, as well as his weak will give way. The squire listened, looked wise, sighed; spoke of Edward's extravagance and the girls' expenses, grew sleepy, and said, "Very true," "That is but reasonable, certainly," glanced at the door, and wondered when his son would have ended his talking and go into the drawing-room; and at length found himself writing the desired letter to Mr. Ness, consenting to everything, terms and all. Mr. Ness never had a more satisfactory pupil; one whom he could treat more as an intellectual equal.

Mr. Corbet, as Ralph was always called in Hamley, was resolute in his cultivation of himself, even exceeding what his tutor demanded of him. He was greedy of information in the hours not devoted to absolute study. Mr. Ness enjoyed giving information, but most of all he liked the hard tough arguments on all metaphysical and ethical questions in which Mr. Corbet delighted to engage him. They lived together on terms of happy equality, having thus much in

common. They were essentially different, however, although there were so many points of resemblance. Mr. Ness was unworldly as far as the idea of real unworldliness is compatible with a turn for self-indulgence and indolence; while Mr. Corbet was deeply, radically worldly, yet for the accomplishment of his object could deny himself all the careless pleasures natural to his age. The tutor and pupil allowed themselves one frequent relaxation, that of Mr. Wilkins's company. Mr. Ness would stroll to the office after the six hours' hard reading were over—leaving Mr. Corbet still bent over the table, book bestrewn—and see what Mr. Wilkins's engagements were. If he had nothing better to do that evening, he was either asked to dine at the parsonage, or he, in his careless hospitable way, invited the other two to dine with him, Ellinor forming the fourth at table, as far as seats went, although her dinner had been eaten early with Miss Monro. She was little and slight of her age, and her father never seemed to understand how she was passing out of childhood. Yet while in stature she was like a child; in intellect, in force of character, in strength of clinging affection, she was a woman. There might be much of the simplicity of a child about her, there was little of the undeveloped girl, varying from day to day like an April sky, careless as to which way her own character is tending. So the two young people sat with their elders, and both relished the company they were thus prematurely thrown into. Mr. Corbet talked as much as either of the other two gentlemen; opposing and disputing on any side, as if to find out how much he could urge against received opinions. Ellinor sat silent; her dark eyes flashing from time to time in vehement interest—sometimes in vehement indignation if Mr. Corbet, riding a-tilt at everyone, ventured to attack her father. He saw how this course excited her, and rather liked pursuing it in consequence; he thought it only amused him.