

# THE AUTHOR OF CRANFORD

## A Sketch of Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell

By JEAN GORDON FORBES

"What good is like to this  
To do worthy the writing, and to write  
Worthy the reading, and the world's delight?"

It is to be regretted that the publication of one of Mrs. Gaskell's most powerful works, "The Life of Charlotte Brontë," should have occasioned her so much annoyance and adverse criticism that she determined no record of her own life should ever be written. All that has been told of her beautiful character, and the simple, helpful way in which she and her husband lived and worked, make us wish very earnestly that she herself had not forbidden the writing of any formal, complete biography.

Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson was born on the 29th September, 1810, at Lindsay Place, Chelsea, near London. Her father, William Stevenson, was a Unitarian minister, a writer, and afterward classical tutor in the Manchester Academy, a very clever man, of whom it was said at his death, that "The literary and scientific world had sustained a great loss in the death of Mr. Stevenson, a man remarkable for the stores of knowledge which he possessed and for the simplicity and modesty by which his rare attainments were concealed." Assuredly some of his ability and much of his modesty were inherited by his daughter, Elizabeth.



Mrs. Stevenson died a month after little Elizabeth's birth, and the child was taken down to her aunt's, Mrs. Lumb, who lived at Knutsford, about fifteen miles from Manchester. "The house," says Mrs. Anne Thackeray Ritchie, "where Mrs. Gaskell lived, as a little girl, is on the heath, a tall, red house, with a wide-spreading view, and with a pretty carved stair-case, and many light windows, back and front. I have heard that Mrs. Gaskell like many imaginative children, was not always happy. In her hours of childish sorrow and trouble, she used to run away from her aunt's house across the heath, and hide herself in one of the many green hollows, finding comfort in the silence and in the company of birds and insects." She evidently alludes to herself, when in one of her novels, she compares a child who has lost her mother to a lamb shut out of a sheepfold, or a bird who cannot find its nest.

In this little town of Knutsford her childhood and girlhood were spent amid the delightful people, and the picturesque scenes which she afterward described with pathos and humor in "Cranford." The inhabitants of the little town all acknowledge the truth of the portrait. One of them says, "Cranford is all about Knutsford. My old mistress, Miss Hawker, is mentioned in it, and our poor cow. She did go to the field in a flannel waistcoat, because she had burned herself in a lime pit."

For two years in her girlhood she was educated at Stratford-on-Avon, treading the flowery fields where Shakespeare so many years before had trod, worshipping in the church where he had worshipped, and perhaps unconsciously imbibing some of that classic English air which was later to have its influence on her mind and books.

She is described as a very beautiful young woman. She had a well-shaped head, regular, finely-cut features, brilliant, expressive eyes, and perfect hands. She was bright, almost joyous, and a delightful companion.

In 1832 she married, at the Knutsford Parish Church, the Rev. William Gaskell, minister of Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, a most intellectual man, who encouraged her in all her literary labors.

Mrs. Gaskell prided herself on being a capable housekeeper; yet her energies were not all exhausted by her household cares nor the training of her children. She identified herself with all the interests of her husband's parish, and was ready at any time to devote herself to bettering the conditions of the Manchester poor, and to aid in every charitable organization. Her intimate knowledge of these working-people, gained while visiting them in their homes, enabled her to make evident to the world at large the wrongs and indignities which were imposed on them by their employers—the rich.

For several years, Mrs. Gaskell's married life went on happily, but uneventfully. Then in 1838, Mr. William Howitt announced his new book, "Visits to Remarkable Places," and "received," as Mrs. Howitt tells us in her autobiography, "a letter from Manchester, signed E. C. Gaskell, drawing his attention to a fine old seat, Clopton Hall, near Stratford-on-Avon. It described in so powerful and graphic a manner the writer's visit as a school-girl to the mansion and its inmates, that, in replying, he urged his correspondent to use her pen for the public benefit."

For some time she did not take this advice, but when her only son died in 1844, of scarlet fever, Mr. Gaskell, to rouse her from the depression of her intense grief, urged her to write something. She responded and wrote, not the story which had been in her mind for some years, but a story of real life, burning and throbbing with the great distress which was then existing in the manufacturing towns. The poor were being oppressed beyond endurance by the rich, their employers. Mrs. Gaskell knew of the wrongs and difficulties of the Manchester workman, and she wrote of them from her heart, in her first book called "Mary Barton."

"I have often thought," she says, "how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me in the streets of Manchester. I had always felt deep sympathy with the careworn men who looked as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want, tossed to and fro by circumstances even in a greater degree than other men are. A

little manifestation of this sympathy, and a little attention to the expression of feelings on the part of some of the workpeople with whom I was acquainted, had laid open to me the hearts of one or two of the more thoughtful of them. I saw that they were sore and irritable against the rich."

These things burned deep into the heart of Mrs. Gaskell and the anguish of it all she put into "Mary Barton," "the novel with a sob in it," the book "full of storm and tempest, of the tears, the struggles, and the long-suffering patience of the manufacturing classes."

This book at once created universal attention, and like Byron, Mrs. Gaskell awoke one morning to find herself famous.

Thus she gained an entrance into the inner circle of literary lights in London, and soon counted among her friends, Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle and his wife, Thackeray, Samuel Rogers and others. Another notable acquaintance which Mrs. Gaskell made at this time was Charlotte Brontë. They became fast friends and we get a glimpse of them together from Mrs. Gaskell's "Life of Charlotte Brontë." They were walking over the purple moors together when Charlotte Brontë observed that she believed some people were appointed to sorrow and disappointment, that it did not fall to the lot of all to have their lives in pleasant places. Mrs. Gaskell took a different view; she thought that human lives were more equal, that to some happiness and misery came in strong patches of light and shadow, while in the lives of others they were equally blended. After they parted Charlotte Brontë compared Mrs. Gaskell's letters "to the nourishing efficacy of daily bread," or, "to a page of Cranford."

In 1853 she published "Ruth," a story of a young girl's temptation and fall, told of the gentle, refined touch of one who would gladly have rescued that girl from her tempter and who wished to warn others of the danger-trap ever set. In this same year appeared the greatest of all her works, the inimitable "Cranford." For humor and pathos there is nothing like it in all Victorian literature. Yet it has scarcely a plot at all, but is a delicately drawn and tinted picture of the quaint life in an old-fashioned country town.

"Cranford" was in possession of the Amazons, for all the holders of houses above a certain rent were women. If a married couple came to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappeared; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the Cranford evening parties, or he is accounted for by being in the great commercial town of Drumble."

Miss Mattie Jenkins is a marvel; so timid, so amusing, so pathetic. She is fifty-three and is spending the day with her old love, Mr. Holbrook: "It is very pleasant dining with a bachelor," she says softly; "I only hope it is not improper—so many pleasant things are."

They are gently bred, these Cranford ladies—they all practise "Elegant economics." There is pathos as well as fun in the description of Mrs. Forrester pretending not to know what cakes were sent up "at a party in her baby-house of a dwelling \* \* \* though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes!"

Mrs. Gaskell's short stories, and there are many, are scarcely equal to her novels, yet some of them are very beautiful.

Mrs. Gaskell's last novel, "Wives and Daughters," is a vivid and powerful study of life and character. There is something pathetic in the fact that this last of the writer's stories was left unfinished. Few guessed that before the end of this serial story, the great attraction of the *Cornhill Magazine*, the hand that wrote it would be cold in death. On Sunday evening, November 12th, 1865, Mrs. Gaskell died quite suddenly at Holybourne, Alton, Hampshire, a country house which she had recently bought as a surprise for her husband. Her "last days," wrote one who knew her best, "had been full of loving thought and tender help for others. She was so sweet and dear and noble beyond words."



Her daughter, Mrs. Holland, wrote of her, "It was wonderful how her writing never interfered with her social or domestic duties. I think she was the best and most practical housekeeper I ever came across, and the brightest, most agreeable hostess, to say nothing of being a mother and friend. She combined both, being my mother and greatest friend in a way you do not often I think, find between mother and daughter."

Mrs. Gaskell's books can only have a wholesome influence over her readers. Her characters are all so human, the women are womanly, tender; the men are strong, full of faults sometimes (surely more life-like!) and everywhere there is an atmosphere of friendliness through which the author encourages her readers, to prove themselves friendly, to love one another, and to let the spirit of love rule their lives.

The story of Mrs. Gaskell's life is full of interest to all women who have read that delightful classic, "Cranford." The author of the above article is evidently in love with her subject and has written of it with understanding and sympathy. To do one thing perfectly is to have attained a great success, and Mrs. Gaskell's story of the little village is a gem of genre depiction in prose. The character of "Miss Mattie" is one of the most lovable in fiction and will be remembered when more imposing figures are forgotten. "Cranford" is a village in dreamland.