

INTRODUCTION

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the spirit of unrest that belonged to any town on our coast, during the wars with France, and side by side with this, we have the Quaker shopkeepers and the men they employed. One of those men, Philip Hepburn, is really a quite remarkable creation. Step by step we follow his career; his devotion to his cousin, the pretty Sylvia of the story; his becoming a partner in the shop; and then, the whole tragedy of his marriage, his disappearance, and his final return. These are all in the great manner of the best fiction of our own or of any other time.

Mrs. Gaskell it is true had no faculty for the kind of descriptive writing in which Sir Walter Scott excelled. When, for example, she describes Captain Kinraid at the siege of St. Jean d'Acre, she has such passages as this:—

‘His heart was like a war-horse and said, Ha, ha! as the boat bounded over the waves that were to land him under the ancient machicolated walls, where the Crusaders made their last stand in the Holy Land.’

But no English writer of modern days has had so perfect a command of a gentle humour, a kindly pathos. The infinite tenderness of her treatment of women and children is nowhere more marked than in this beautiful story. Other women writers are sarcastic at the expense of their sex—Mrs. Gaskell never.

It may be taken as characteristic of the attitude of her age, an age when there was much reaction from the days of revolt, that our author should accept so passively the cruel laws under which old Daniel Robson ended his life on the gallows. It is the only blur on the book in my eyes. This story will last for all