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MILLY BARTON AND EMMA GWYTHER

by Kathleen Adams

For many years the tomb of Emma Gwyther in Chilvers Coton Churchyard in Nuneaton was totally obscured by a massive yew tree until it was recently cut back to reveal the sorry state of the tomb beneath it. Badly broken and its lettering difficult to read, it was clearly in great need of some restoration because of its place in the George Eliot story.

There seems little doubt that Emma Gwyther was the original of Milly Barton, the hard-working wife of the Rev. Amos Barton in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Emma's husband was the Rev. John Gwyther, curate of Chilvers Coton Church 1831-41: since the vicar, the Rev. George Hake, was an absentee vicar for the most of his Vicariate (1831-1838), John and Emma lived in the vicarage. The Gwythers would have been well known to Mary Ann Evans during the years her family worshipped at Chilvers Coton, and keen observation of the curate provided many of the characteristics of Amos Barton. Gwyther officiated at her mother's funeral and the wedding of her sister Chrissey and many of the changes he instigated at Chilvers Coton are echoed in those at 'Shepperton' Church in Amos Barton's time.

At the beginning of 1998 the George Eliot Fellowship commissioned a stonemason to restore Emma Gwyther's table tomb almost opposite the door of the church, and the lettering on the slate memorial tablets revealed a story that is strikingly close to Milly Barton's. The death of Milly's seventh child, born prematurely, is soon followed by the death of Milly herself at the age of thirty-five, no doubt worn out by poverty, hard work and child-bearing.

Emma Gwyther's tomb tells us that

Within this tomb, awaiting the summons of the Archangel's trumpets, is enclosed all that was mortal of EMMA, the beloved wife of the Rev. John Gwyther B.A., Curate of this parish, who departed this life
November 4th 1836

Aged 34 years

'Looking for that blessed hope and glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ' Titus ch. 2 v 15

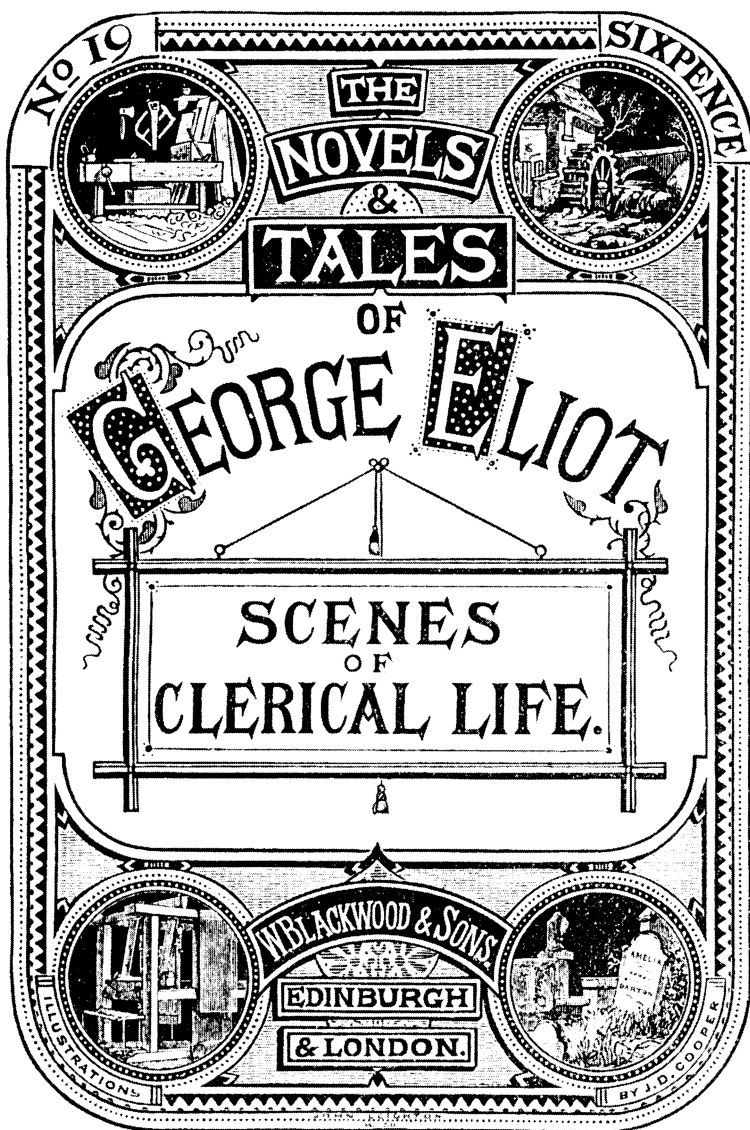
She left a husband and seven children to lament their loss, but, assured of her eternal gain, they mourn not as those who have no hope. Faith enables them to anticipate their reunion in a state of endless felicity.

On the second side of the tomb the story continues:

The various duties of her station she discharged with Christian fidelity; mild, amiable and affectionate. She was beloved by all who knew her, devout and unostentatious in her piety. She has led an example worthy of universal imitation, deeply imbued with the spirit of the Gospel.

'Peace on earth and good will towards men'

She died in that peace which arises only from faith in the finished salvation of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ.



John Leighton's design for the green paper wrapper of the cheap illustrated edition of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which was issued in five sixpenny numbers in 1868. Bound in red cloth, the numbers became Vol IV of the Stereotyped Edition of George Eliot's works. The design for the roundel depicting Milly Barton's headstone was used for the gilt medallion on the front cover of the cloth-bound volume.

At the time of Emma's death, Mary Ann Evans and her family were regular worshippers at Chilvers Coton Church. She may have seen, or certainly heard about, Emma's funeral. Perhaps, as at the funeral of Milly in her first story, the children were present,

for Amos had willed it so, thinking that some dim memory of that sacred moment might remain and link itself with what [they] would hear of [the] sweet mother in after years. They made a circle round the grave while the coffin was being lowered. ('The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton', Ch. 9)

There may well be descendants of Emma's seven children still living. Who they are or where they are we may never know, but they would perhaps appreciate the restoration of the tomb whose occupant was to become Milly Barton in 1857.



SHEPPERTON CHURCH, AS IT WAS

Vignette by Edmund Morison Wimperis (engraved by J. D. Cooper) for the title-page of the cloth-bound Stereotyped Edition (1868) of *Scenes of Clerical Life*.