



CHAPTER ONE

HERNE HILL

CLARENCE BICKNELL WAS BORN ON 27 October 1842 at Herne Hill, then a prosperous suburb a few miles south of London. He was the son of a wealthy merchant, Elhanan Bicknell, and his wife Lucinda Browne Bicknell, the sister of Hablot Knight Browne, ‘Phiz’,¹ the principal illustrator of the works of Charles Dickens. Elhanan, who made his fortune from sperm whale oil, which was used in those days for lighting and lubrication, already had five children by two previous wives before he and Lucinda so successfully produced eight more, of whom Clarence was the last. Elhanan spent little time with his children, but would occasionally entertain them by performing magic tricks, spinning coins, and telling stories at the dinner table. Lucinda was more interested in the children’s physical education and insisted that they perform calisthenics, for which she purchased ‘clubs, boards and poles, the latter often winging off and smashing windows.’²

In line with her desire for her children’s physical fitness, and at a time when she was pregnant with Clarence, she and Elhanan took two of their sons, Herman and Sidney, hiking in Derbyshire. A year later, they took one-year-old Clarence, his nurse, Herman and Sidney to North Wales, where the older boys ascended Cader Idris and Snowdon, while Clarence was exposed for the first time to mountains.

Lucinda was a talented artist, pianist, harpist and singer, and she brought music teachers from London to instruct the children. Another of her passions was French, and a Monsieur Guillaume, who had ‘an appalling accent’, also showed up from London. To protect himself from marauding boys, he carried a bible in one pocket and a pistol in the other.

Lucinda’s eight children – Herman, Ada, Sidney, Edgar, Percy, Matilda, little Lucinda and Clarence – were all born in the twelve years between 1830 and 1842. Sidney, whose diaries (East Sussex Record Office) are so informative, adored Herman, but had nothing pleasant to say about Ada, Clarence’s favourite sibling. Sidney constantly carped about her, and his carping reveals the depths of his sibling jealousy: ‘My parents were absurdly extravagant in providing teaching for my sister Ada . . . She was taught French, Italian, music, singing, elocution, dancing and other accomplishments by the best professors of London, though she never evinced the slightest aptitude for anything. My mother worshipped these masters, who flattered and fooled her about her daughter’s genius.’





Above: Stephen Poyntz Denning, watercolour portrait depicting six of Clarence's siblings in 1841, left to right, Algernon Sidney, Percy, Herman, Ada, Matilda and Edgar. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Left: Thomas Philips R.A., *Elhanan Bicknell, Master of the Vintners*, 1853. Vintners.

Facing page, top: Photo by A.S. Bicknell, *The Residence of the late E. Bicknell Esq, Herne Hill, Dulwich, May 1859*, written on the back in Sidney Bicknell's hand.

Facing page, bottom: Photo by A.S. Bicknell, *The Garden at Herne Hill, May 1859*.





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MARVELS: THE LIFE OF CLARENCE BICKNELL

This jealously boiled up when, at the age of eight years and ten months, Sidney was packed off to Dr Laing's in Brighton, a school he loathed. He expresses surprise that his parents cared so little about their children's education, saying, 'I was sent about like a parcel, carriage paid, without more than the most superficial inquiry of acquaintance. Somebody had said Dr Laing's was a good school, and that was enough, it would do.' For Sidney, the only redeeming feature of Dr Laing's was that Herman also attended and suffered. They would be followed there by their younger brothers Edgar and Percy – but not by Clarence. By the time he was old enough to join them, Dr Laing had retired, and Clarence, fortunately, was parcelled out to a very different type of school.

He grew up surrounded by a beautiful garden, its long view reaching from the verandah to the distant Norwood hills. Even though London was only five miles away, no houses interrupted a vista that incorporated woods and meadows. Mature specimens of oak, ash, elm and a magnificent cedar of Lebanon cast their shade across closely clipped lawns. Young trees of exotic species and large shrubs were planted at intervals close to the sinuous paths that meandered around the large property and down the hill. As a budding botanist, Clarence could not have wished for a more entrancing environment. He was soon collecting wildflowers and making drawings of them, and he was devoted to drawing and painting from his earliest youth.³

The mansion in which he was born had the air of a prosperous Late Regency matron: imposing, bosomy, pale and stucco-fronted; but it lacked the elaborate trim so beloved of the Victorians. It made up for plainness with a columned portico, sash windows, octagonal gables, tall chimney stacks, many roof lines, a 120-foot long conservatory, and a labyrinth of rooms.

The original building was fairly modest, but as Elhanan's family and wealth increased and his pre-occupation with modern British painting grew, he extended the house and added two large wings, one at either end. The family lived upstairs and he turned the ground floor into an art gallery with reception rooms. He also created a library that contained not only books but musical instruments, telescopes and microscopes. He added a billiard room and a cellar, that absolute necessity for a Warden of the Worshipful Company of Vintners. Outdoors, he made sure his establishment was self-supporting by adding a dairy for his small herd of cows, a pig sty, a kitchen garden, greenhouses, stables, chicken coops and a carpenter's shop.⁴

Elhanan had a sharp eye for contemporary British artists but no time whatsoever for Old Masters. 'On returning from an extensive tour in Italy, undertaken for the purpose of seeing works of art, I remember hearing him say he had not seen a picture he would give a damn for,' recounts Clarence's cousin and direct contemporary, Edgar Browne, Phiz's son. Elhanan made a point of getting to know both the person and the work of modern British painters such as Turner, Landseer, Stanfield, Etty, Collins, Denning and Callcott, and fashionable sculptors such as Baily. A special friend and contemporary was the artist David Roberts, a prominent orientalist, whose daughter Christine married Henry Sanford Bicknell, Elhanan's son by his second wife.

Elhanan avoided dealers like the plague, buying directly from the artists themselves, befriending them, commissioning them, and entertaining them at Herne Hill, some of them long before they became famous. He had a special eye for Turner, and at a time when that artist was not yet in fashion, before Ruskin singled him out for fame, Elhanan bought a number of his paintings that had been left unsold after being exhibited at the Royal Academy. His association with and admiration for Turner endured for many years.





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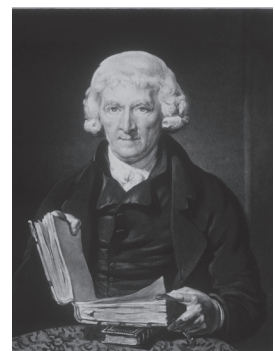
J.M.W. Turner; *Giudecca*, which hung in the drawing room at Herne Hill.

The old drawing room in the centre of the house, whose walls were lined with mahogany to keep out damp and then covered with white and gold rococo panelling, was used to display watercolours. Instead of framing the paintings, he set them into panels in the walls and, according to Edgar Browne ‘if I remember correctly’ even went so far as to decorate the door panels with Turner’s *Rivers of France*. In the new drawing room, he hung several of Turner’s masterpieces including *Giudecca*, *La Donna della Salute* and *San Giorgio*.⁵

Clarence’s mother Lucinda was born in 1801, although she always claimed a birthdate of 1804. She was thus 13 years younger than her husband.⁶ Lucinda was the seventh of the 15 children of William Loder Browne and his wife Katherine Hunter. Talented and absolutely charming, she was according to Edgar Browne ‘a notable woman, and managed her household affairs with a skill truly early Victorian.’⁷

The Brownes were descended from Michel Bruneau and his wife H el ene Descharmes, both of them Huguenots who came to London as refugees from religious persecution in France sometime in the early 1700s. Wanting to assimilate, they changed their names to Michael and Eleanor Brown, and then to Browne. They lived in Spitalfields where Michael was a maker of wires used in weaving velvet and tinkered with watchmaking. Many of their descendants, like Clarence himself, had a talent for working on a small scale, and many of them were remarkably good artists.

Elhanan Bicknell’s parents were William Bicknell (1749–1825) and his wife Elizabeth Randall. William worked for many years in his family’s 500-year-old, prosperous wool-combing and serge business in Taunton, but just before his 40th birthday, when Elhanan was a year old, he broke with family tradition and became a schoolmaster. He was greatly loved, a voracious reader, a charming and witty conversationalist, a dedicated and conscientious worker and a lover of

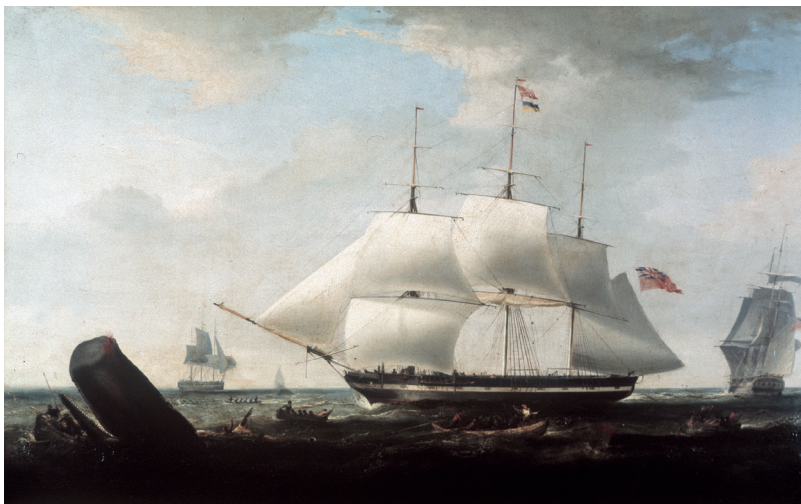


Samuel Drummond, Mr William Bicknell Senior, Master of an Academy at Tooting, Surrey, late of Ponder’s End. 1813.





Samuel Drummond, *Elhanan Bicknell*, a youthful 42 years old in 1830.



William John Huggins (1781–1845), *The Whalers*, painted from a sketch by Thomas Beale, *A South Sea Whaling Voyage*, and the inspiration for J.M.W. Turner, *Whalers*, 1845. Courtesy of Mark Bicknell.

music – many of his happiest hours were spent at the spinet, the harpsichord, or the organ. He believed in a happy family life based on civilised appreciation of the liberal arts, a belief strengthened by his staunch Unitarianism.

Thus Elhanan grew up in a large and attractive property until he was 16, at which point his father moved the school to Surrey Hall, near Tooting Common in London's southern suburbs.

Elhanan (1788–1861) was William and Elizabeth's fifth child; he was given the name Elhanan – 'God is gracious' in Hebrew – in honour of the American preacher and Universalist, Elhanan Winchester, whom William had met and greatly admired during Winchester's six-year stay in England. Elhanan's life echoed his father's in his committed adherence to Unitarianism.

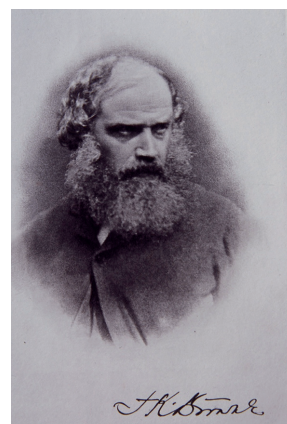
Having finished his education at his father's school, Elhanan worked there as an assistant teacher until he was 21, when he decided to become a gentleman-farmer. He studied at Cause, near Shrewsbury, but was not cut out to be a farmer and when, a few months later, at the end of 1809, he received an invitation from his uncle John Walter Langton, he leapt at the opportunity. Langton wanted to retire from his business as a ship owner, merchant and manufacturer of candles; he proposed that Elhanan join his son John Bicknell Langton as a partner in the enterprise. Elhanan accepted the offer and returned to London to join the firm at 3 High Street, Newington Butts, then a hamlet just north of Camberwell, but now part of Southwark. He soon cemented the partnership by marrying his cousin Hannah Wootton Langton, John Bicknell Langton's sister. Elhanan turned out to have powerful business and financial acumen, and under his guidance Langton & Bicknell became a prosperous concern, operating a fleet of more than thirty ships with a monopoly over the Pacific sperm whale fishery until free trade opened up the market to all comers.

Merchants were prepared to underwrite dangerous sperm whale expeditions because the reward was great. The sperm whale carried a pot of gold in its head: the prized spermaceti oil. It also provided regular oil rendered from its blubber, whalebone used in corsets, and ambergris, a fixative used in the manufacture of perfumes. When Elhanan started work with John Langton, whaling was at its height and the Pacific trade was opening up. Though the range of the sperm whale was world-wide, the hunting grounds off the east coast of Australia and around New Zealand were particularly abundant, and that is where Langton and Bicknell concentrated their efforts.

In 1819, a mere nine years after joining the firm, Elhanan was wealthy enough to move his family to the house he had built at the top of Herne Hill. By that time, he had three living children: a son, also named Elhanan, by Hannah – she died of consumption in 1815; then Henry Sanford and Mary Ann, by his second wife, Mary Jones – she died of heart failure at Herne Hill in 1827. He married his third wife, Lucinda Browne, Clarence's mother, two years later. As a music teacher, she may have been brought from London to instruct Elhanan's children by his two earlier marriages, thus offering him the golden opportunity to court this lovely young woman with beautiful hands and elegant neck and shoulders. They were married on 5 May 1829 at St Matthew's, Brixton, and Lucinda was the great love of Elhanan's life.

One of Elhanan's first gestures of help to a promising artist occurred around 1830, shortly after his marriage to Lucinda. He perceived that his young brother-in-law Hablot Knight Browne was showing extraordinary artistic talent but he also recognised that the large and perennially penurious Browne family could become a drain on his financial resources. Rather than give Hablot money, he decided to invest in the boy. He removed him from boarding school in Norfolk and apprenticed him to Findens, the London engravers. Thus Elhanan launched the career of Phiz – Hablot's pen-name – whose illustrations for the novels of Charles Dickens would soon be recognised around the world.

By 1838, with his fortune assured, Elhanan began seriously collecting modern British art. His taste was eclectic, running to, among others, Roberts's foreign landscapes, Etty's nudes, Turner and Stansfield's marine paintings. It also included several works by Gainsborough. 'There is nothing remarkable in a rich man making a collection of pictures,' states Edgar Browne, 'but it was not so common in the early Victorian days, and this was done entirely at first hand, on his own judgment, and without the aid or intervention of dealers . . . he must have had a shrewd idea of their pecuniary value and prospects, as the collection sold for about three times its original cost.'⁸ Yes, Elhanan had a sharp eye, keen instincts, and financial acuity when it came to buying paintings – and not just paintings. He sought out sculptures too, in particular the work of Edward Hodges Baily, sculptures that included *Eve listening to the Voice*, *Cupid*, *Psyche*, *Paris* and *Helen*. Baily had studied with the great English sculptor John Flaxman and he became well known for his monumental work. His fame skyrocketed when he carved the statue *Horatio* for the top of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, where it still



Clarence's uncle, Hablot Knight Browne (1815–1882), 'Phiz'.



Clarence with his donkey in 1850.

towers over Edwin Landseer's lions. In spite of his successes, Baily was chronically short of money and was grateful for Elhanan's loyal patronage.

Lucinda passed on to Clarence a passion for drawing wildflowers, playing the piano and singing. She may also have kindled in him an interest in foreign travel by reading aloud from the letters of her six brothers and one sister who variously travelled as far as the West Indies, Latvia, India, Australia, New Zealand and Mauritius. And no doubt she would have shared with him her pride in the artistic accomplishments of Phiz, who remained in England. By the time Clarence was eight, Phiz was famous, having already illustrated *The Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son* and *David Copperfield*. His carefully executed, detailed etchings of scenes from the novels would have made a strong impression on Clarence, whose own talent for illustrating on a small scale was rapidly developing.

As a Unitarian, Elhanan did not believe in sending his sons to public school because, as Sidney writes, 'My father . . . from his being a nonconformist by birth as well as choice, viewed with entire disfavour the religious education, the religious tests in force, the system

of fagging, and much besides, which his sons would have encountered at a public school or university . . . it would indicate weakness of character if he allowed us to say we believed in the Trinity.' Instead, Elhanan had his children educated by tutors before sending Herman, Sidney, Percy and Edgar off, one by one, to Dr Laing's dreadful school in Brighton. Clarence remained at home with his sisters, Ada, who was 11 years older, and Matilda and Lucinda, respectively four and two years older. He also spent time with Edgar Browne, Phiz's son, born like him in 1842, who lived in nearby Thornton Heath. Each boy had a pet donkey, and Edgar and his siblings even had a goat that pulled the younger Brownes around in a cart.

Browne described his uncle Elhanan as a large, handsome, red-faced man, and his Bicknell cousins as all above average in personal appearance and intelligence. He adds an interesting note about the way they talked. '[Elhanan had] a rather thick utterance, which in his children became converted into an extreme difficulty with the letter 'r'. In order to improve their speech some of them, at all events, were taught elocution by a distinguished actor of the day, Alfred Wigan. Whether it was owing to his efforts, or some other reason, the difficulty disappeared as they attained adult age.'⁹ Perhaps this was not so in the case of Clarence. G.B. Briano writes in *Vita esperantista di Genova e Liguria dal 1900 al 1975*, 'According to the testimony of a contemporary, Bicknell spoke Esperanto fluently, even though he suffered from a slight stutter which he had from birth.'¹⁰



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The Bicknell home was often overrun with painters, sculptors and critics of the day. John Ruskin, a young neighbour from across the road, was a constant presence. Browne refers to him as ‘a vehement young man who was greatly attached to my aunt. He would read to her long screeds of a work in manuscript. Sometimes he would set the whole household running about fetching colours, brushes, paper, that he might on the spur of the moment copy a flower from the conservatory.’ Throughout Clarence’s early years, the parties for artists and critics continued apace. Here is an invitation from Elhanan to William Etty, written on 20 June 1845:

My dear Sir

I have called to ask you to dine with me on Tuesday next to meet Turner & two or three other RA’s [members of the Royal Academy of Art] if I am not disappointed owing to the shortness of the notice Turner having only just fixed the time. His head is full of fish just now & he wants to get away after others.

Dinner at ½ p. 5 – if walk in the garden before

Yrs very truly E Bicknell, Friday Noon.

He followed this up later the same day from his office:

Newington Butts, June 20th.

My dear Sir,

After I had written my note to you at your house I peeped into your Studio and saw a little picture of an Indian & a female figure. I wish you would let me have this nicely finished – My house much wants something of yours in it.

Yrs very truly

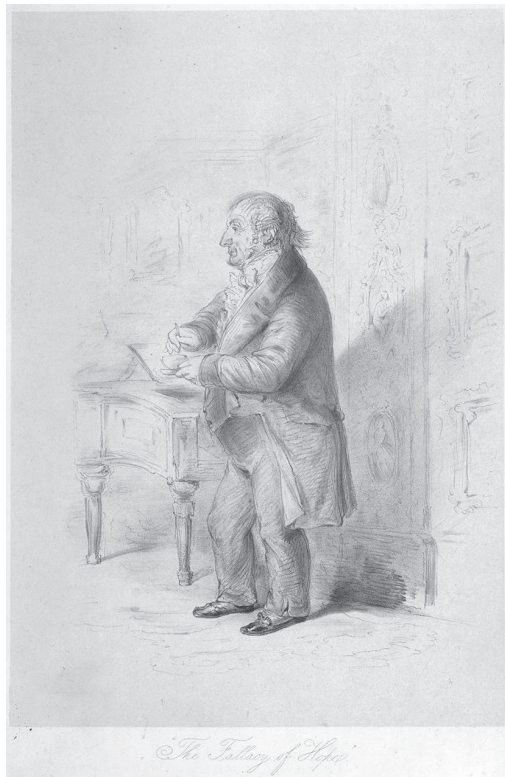
E Bicknell¹¹

Could this be the very dinner party where Sidney witnessed the following well-known episode? He recounts how much Turner disliked having his portrait painted, and how two of the other guests, Count d’Orsay and Sir Edwin Landseer, decided to play a trick on him. ‘Whilst Turner unsuspectingly chatted with a guest over a cup of tea in the drawing-room, d’Orsay placed himself as a screen beside him to hide, when necessary, Landseer sketching him at full length in pencil on the back of a letter.’¹² Sidney also mentions that Landseer included the Louis XIV panelling and the piano inlaid with Sèvres plaques in the background of the drawing.

D’Orsay redrew and enlarged the sketch and sold it to the print seller J. Hogarth, for twenty guineas. ‘[I]t was then lithographed and published by the latter, January 1st, 1851, with the title of Turner’s mysterious poem, “The Fallacy of Hope,” at the bottom.’ There is no record of what Turner felt about this deception, but Sidney declares grandiosely: ‘I knew Turner extremely well, and I have always considered [the sketch] to be a most admirable, truthful likeness; indeed, the only one exactly portraying his general appearance and expression in his latter years.’

In 1845, Turner exhibited two paintings, both called *Whalers*, at the Royal Academy, and in 1846 another two whaling paintings. It is thought that they were part of a series either commissioned





Count d'Orsay, *The Fallacy of Hope*: Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) in Mr. E. Bicknell's drawing room from a sketch by Sir Edwin Landseer.

by Elhanan Bicknell or painted expressly with him in mind as a possible buyer. Elhanan had put at Turner's disposal one of his four copies of Beale's book *Observations on the Natural History of the Sperm Whale* and one of the firm's portraits of a whaler by the marine artist William Huggins – still in the Bicknell family. Early in 1845, Turner wrote to Elhanan, 'I have a whale or two on the canvas', and asked him to call in at his studio in Queen Anne Street at his earliest convenience to take a look. Elhanan did just that, and later, after the first two paintings in the series were exhibited at the Royal Academy, he took one home. Alas, according to John Ruskin senior, '[Bicknell] found Water Colour in Whalers & rubbed out some with his Handky. He went to Turner who looked Daggers & refused to do anything, but at last he has taken it back to alter . . . all say it is not finished. They account for his hurry & disregard for future fame by putting Water Colours by his stronger passion, love of money.'¹³

This was Elhanan's last dealing with Turner, and he did not buy that painting. *Whalers* (also called *The Whale Ship*) now hangs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where it emanates its own particular atmosphere of light and fury.



J.M.W. Turner, *Whalers*, 1845. Metropolitan Museum.

Toward the end of February 1850, when she was 48 years old, Clarence's strong and vibrant mother became catastrophically ill. Clarence later wrote about her illness and dying on the front endpaper of the Bible she had given him when he was a little boy. On the right side, he has written his name in his childhood hand; inserted among the pages, are three religious cards of distinctly Roman Catholic sentiment. On the left side, Clarence has written in a mature hand:

My mother died at 7.30 a.m., March 6th, 1850. When saying goodbye to my eldest brother Herman, she said, 'I know that at the present day there are many temptations to infidelity. Do not be led away by them, whatever may be the arguments of those who support them. I wish to be interred in Norwood Cemetery. I wish my funeral to be as plain as possible. I hope that you will think of me when I am gone, even as I have thought of you. I rely firmly on the wisdom & goodness of the Almighty, and look forward to a cheerful immortality. Without that hope these moments would indeed be dreary. God bless you.'

She died after 10 days illness of peritonitis; she suffered great pain, & scarcely slept at all, morphine only making her delirious; but when not under the influence of medicine her mind remained perfectly clear. She took leave of her elder children separately, & said the Lord's Prayer out loud a few minutes before the end. R.I.P.

There is something significant about the sentence: 'She took leave of her elder children separately.' It sounds as though Clarence and his two young sisters were not allowed to bid individual farewells to their mother, but said their goodbyes as a group or were entirely excluded.

Clarence's claim that Lucinda died of peritonitis is not at odds with Sidney's statement that she died of enteric fever, which is another name for typhoid. A serious complication of typhoid is intestinal perforation followed by septicaemia and peritonitis. Sidney scotched a rumour that his mother had died from swallowing a bone, saying there was no foundation for that absurd story. He recounts that his mother's death made the children feel as though they were orphans because their father was an unsympathetic parent, esteemed but not loved, who had never taken any interest in their education. Herman was desperately sad and he suggested the family wear black for the rest of their lives. Signor Magrini, the children's Italian tutor, was so distressed on learning the news that he wept, raved and tore his hair. Elhanan's grief can only be imagined.

Lucinda's body was first interred in the catacombs of West Norwood cemetery, and then moved to a large tomb next to Elhanan's after his death in 1861. The two tombs are to be found in the unconsecrated section of West Norwood cemetery – that is, the section in which non-conformists were buried. The tombs of Elhanan's three other wives are nowhere to be seen in West Norwood cemetery. The first two died before 1837 when the cemetery opened. By the time his fourth wife died, she had converted to Roman Catholicism and chose eternal residence elsewhere. Lucinda's inscription is simple, although even in death she appears three years younger than her actual age. Perhaps Elhanan was ignorant to the end about her little deception.

Lucinda Bicknell
Born 30th May 1804
Died 6th March 1850

Immediately after her death, Elhanan lost no time in making contact with his old friend Edward Baily, the sculptor, who hurried to Herne Hill to make a death mask. His subsequent marble bust of Lucinda is a lovely memorial to a lovely woman.¹⁴

A year later, Lucinda's personal effects were divided up among the children. The four eldest boys, Herman, Edgar, Percy, and Sidney chose books according to seniority. The girls inherited her jewellery. Sidney, who can never resist a jab at his bossy sister, points out that Ada received a valuable diamond ring and other rings, and the greater part of the rest of the jewellery, even as she grumbled about not receiving a share of the books. He adds that, according to his sister Lucinda, Ada ultimately obtained all the jewellery. Clarence is not mentioned in the division of spoils, being too young to enjoy the books and unable to sport the jewellery. His bequest must have been the Bible in which he reported his mother's death.

In the 1851 census, five people are listed as living at the Herne Hill mansion: Elhanan, ship-owner and merchant; Ada, who is given no role; and Matilda, little Lucinda and Clarence who are referred to as 'scholars at home.' It is surprising that no live-in servants are mentioned.

In the months following his wife's death, Elhanan may have distracted himself from grief by reading a new book, published in England in October of that year. It was *The Whale* by Herman Melville, published a month later in America under the title *Moby-Dick*. Melville based his novel in part on the famous ramming and sinking of the whaler *Essex* by a gigantic sperm whale in 1820, an incident with which Elhanan would have been well acquainted. It is highly likely that Elhanan and Melville met in London during Melville's visit to London in 1849. Both were admirers of Turner – Melville collected Turners, in the form of engravings of the paintings¹⁵ – and both were fascinated by whales. Elhanan had given Turner *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale*, and Melville wrote on his own copy of the book, 'Turner's pictures of whalers were suggested by this book.'¹⁶ In Chapter 100, Elhanan would have noted with pleasure that Melville included a meeting of the *Pequod* with a whaling ship from London called the *Samuel Enderby*. The *Samuel Enderby* was a real ship, in which Elhanan Bicknell was the major shareholder.¹⁷

Ada, who was twenty at the time of Lucinda's death, suddenly found herself occupied with comforting her siblings and her father and running the household. She was strong and competent, in spite of Sidney's snide remarks. Edgar Browne describes Ada as being a large, striking person with a splendid physique, fine colouring and regular features. It was Ada, of all his siblings, with whom Clarence formed the closest attachment, and she and her family would play a major role in his later life. Elhanan disliked being unmarried, even though his daughter proved to be an efficient manager of the household, and two years after Lucinda's death he wed his fourth wife, Louisa Holland Jones, the widow of the brother of his second wife. They were married at St George's church, Brighton, by Dr Laing. None of the children attended. Elhanan was 62, Louisa was 47, and Sidney claimed that on her part it was simply a marriage for position and money. She did not like the children and they disliked her. David Roberts referred to her as 'the old hen', and complained mightily about her constant 'simpering and giggling'.¹⁸ He also complained about 'that lout' Sidney, who had 'a habit of snarling'; Roberts found that he could silence Sidney by snarling back.

'Ada, who had been dethroned from management when the fresh mistress arrived, carried on a perpetual internecine warfare with her stepmother', writes Sidney. 'Indeed my sister's temper



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Bust of Lucinda, Clarence's mother, in front of Huggins's oil painting, *Whalers*. Courtesy of Mark Bicknell.

seemed to keep at boiling point, and she tried to dominate with most aggravating and dogmatic interference, not only all her brothers and sisters, but my father as well. If it had not been for my sister's treatment of my father, he would very likely never have married again, and certainly not so soon.'

The world that Clarence knew had split asunder, and shortly after the wedding Elhanan decided it was time for him to be parcelled off to boarding school. Still opposed to public schools, he wondered where to send the boy, now that Dr Laing had retired. In the end he chose Rev. J. Edwards's school in Dorney, Buckinghamshire, a strange decision because Edwards had the reputation for preparing young men for entrance to Cambridge, a university of which Elhanan did not approve because of its religious requirements

In the cases of Herman and Sidney, Elhanan had allowed them to attend University College London, a university favoured by dissenters, of which Arthur Hugh Clough was the Principal. 'My brother disliked [Clough] extremely,' says Sidney, 'and one day invited our uncle Hablot K. Browne to dinner in order that he might caricature him exactly with a sketch, which however he very naturally refused to do.' Sidney also mentions that he experimented with being a vegetarian while at university, 'After eating no meat for six weeks I found I had become extremely weak and derived no good. It is a silly craze – living like a monkey.' Clarence would have vehemently disagreed with this statement if he and Sidney ever talked about it; at least in later life, if not well before, he was a committed vegetarian.

After three years of grieving the loss of Lucinda, a joyous event occurred in the Bicknell household in 1853. Sidney describes it:



Since my mother's death we had had no grand dances in our house. Consequently we were overjoyed when my father gave us one on July 12. We had 'Weippert's Palace band', with harp, cornet, violin, violin cello, etc. and a couple of professional singers, whom of course the dancers – there were no 'wallflowers' – never listened to. The first supper was at 12.30, and the second at 1.30; it came from Bridgman, of Wigmore St, a very celebrated confectioner and cost 10/6 a head. It ended at 4.30. A ball at our house was quite an event to excite the neighbourhood, for the four drawing rooms, library, hall, and dining room, filled with works of art, and brilliantly lighted, as well as the splendid conservatory, with its enormous mirror reflecting 60 of the 120 foot length, presented a scene no neighbouring house could match. I also recollect the first ball we ever attended at home, in my mother's time, and how in her anxiety to look young – which she always looked without artificial tricks – she sent for a crack French coiffeur from town, but the man did her hair in such a way that he put on ten years to her age at least. Herman and I had magnificent hand embroidered waistcoats, costing I do not know how much, for the occasion, and I have seen nothing like them at a party since. The famous John Parry sang as well as Miss Louisa Pyne of the Italian Opera, the two Miss Williams, and Clara Novello . . . Herr König too, the best cornet player in the world 'blew our heads off' with his, I think, disagreeable instrument, though the waltzers adored it, especially those who danced in time with difficulty.

Ada married Edward Berry at the Unitarian Chapel in Brixton on 20 August 1857, a wedding that Clarence would have attended because it was held during school holidays. Sidney, as usual, has nothing nice to say about anything concerning Ada:

If I had ever been in the least inclined to join my Father's faith, I am sure that gruesome spectacle would have deterred me. The bride and bridegroom stood on one side of a mahogany table beneath the reading desk and pulpit, and the minister in an ordinary dress was on the other. There was no music, not even a hymn; a Unitarian form of marriage service was read, and the happy pair walked away very shortly as man and wife. At the grand breakfast at home I proposed the Bridesmaids, and I remember saying that like Curtius arrayed in his chamber they were all ready, arrayed in white, to jump into the gulf – of matrimony; a sentiment which my brother in law Dr Edgar, a barrister, afterwards told me, was the best thing said, and in the only good speech there was.

When he was 16, Clarence received the news that his sister Matilda had died of scarlet fever on 22 January 1858. Sidney, for once, has something pleasant to say as he clearly much preferred Matilda to Ada; when he notes Matilda's death, he calls her 'a cheerful, bright, goodlooking girl', who would have been twenty on the first of April.

One by one, all Elhanan's children left Herne Hill. In 1860, Edgar decided to marry Elizabeth Hill, a union that Elhanan considered highly unsuitable. Sidney, ever censorious, has this to say:

What chance would any family ever have of keeping up a decent position, and of advancement, if children are to be allowed to marry any woman they fancy, quite regardless of the relationship she may have to others who are vile. In Edgar's quarrel with my father he was

not only wrong throughout, but he went needlessly out of the way to hurt his feelings by violent language, and finally by insulting him by celebrating his marriage at the church on Herne Hill, close to my father's house, and thus prominently drawing the attention of the neighbourhood to it.

Sidney subsequently tried to smooth over the estrangement between father and son, but Elhanan made his feelings known in his will. As Sidney says: 'When my father died, on Nov. 27, 1861, it was found he had left Edgar only £5000 absolutely, instead of an equal share in trust to those brothers, who were not residuary legatees.'

The last of Elhanan's children to leave Herne Hill was little Lucinda. On 1 August 1861, she married the Chaplain of the Guards, the Rev. Henry Maxwell Egan, at St George's, Hanover Square,¹⁹ thus firmly turning her back on her father's Unitarianism. She was certainly not the only child to do this. At the age of twenty, Sidney himself was baptised at St George's, Bloomsbury, on 2 October 1852, and he recounts what happened as he left the church: 'My grandmother had decked herself out very gaily for the occasion, and put on a white veil, so when I came down the great flight of steps with the ancient dame on my arm, to go to our carriage, the mob outside mistook it for a wedding, and called out "What an abominable shame" – "poor young man", and other very uncomplimentary exclamations.'

Elhanan began slowing down, even as the whale oil business dwindled because of a diminishing supply of whales and the use of kerosene and gas for lighting. He retired in 1859; he bought fewer paintings and he held fewer gatherings of artists and critics. His health began to fail but his staunch support of the Unitarian church never wavered. In early 1861, he pre-empted his own will by donating the then 'timely and munificent sum of £1,000' to the British and Foreign Unitarian Association.²⁰

David Roberts visited his old friend regularly, enjoying dinners at Herne Hill with Elhanan, especially if 'that lout Sid' was absent. Roberts continued to visit up until the evening of 22 November 1861. Then he writes to his daughter: 'I passed The Evening with poor dear Mr Bicknell . . . But I can see he is breaking fast. The swelling in his legs increasing. See him as often as you can.'²¹

Elhanan had been a healthy man until late in life, claiming never to have taken a dose of the simplest medicine in forty years. Sidney blames his death on a severe fever, caught on a trip to Bologna in 1857. It left him with a chronic chest disease, and forced him to consult Dr Williams, of the Brompton Consumption Hospital, once a week. Elhanan took to his bed on 24 November 1861 and died on the afternoon of the 27th. Sidney adds: 'Only about a couple of hours before, he had signed an important codicil to his will, and conversed in full possession of his faculties, till he expressed a desire to sleep a little, and never woke again. The funeral, by his express desire of the plainest kind, took place on [Tuesday] December 3, when he was buried in the unconsecrated division of Norwood Cemetery, near the chapel used by Nonconformists. A plain altar tomb marked the spot till 1875, and then the executors replaced it with a handsome monument designed after a sketch by David Roberts, R.A.'

Elhanan Bicknell's commitment to his religion and to his 'gallery' shines out in the obituaries written after his death. Here is one from *The Christian Reformer*: 'He was a man of genial temper,



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of high and noble principles, one that sought and loved the truth with his whole soul, and who thought no sacrifices too great in its behalf . . . His zeal never flagged and never degenerated into bigotry.²² And here is what *The Art-Journal* has to say: 'A visit to his elegant suburban villa was a treat of no ordinary kind to all who could appreciate those luxuries which elevate the mind, and that wealth which confers honour on the possessor.'²³ Elhanan's grandiose tomb bears a simple inscription:

In memory of
Elhanan Bicknell of Herne Hill
Born 21st December 1788. Died 27th November 1861