

A Visit To Eton

Elizabeth Gaskell

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"I have a great curiosity to see Eton," said my friend F — —, as we sat at breakfast one morning in "the old University Club;" "you are always praising the system of public schools, and telling stories of the days when you were at Eton yourself. I confess there are some parts of that system of education which I do not altogether approve of; but perhaps a visit to the College, with you at my side to explain all we see, may remove my prejudices."

"I will accompany you, with all my heart," said I; "I have not been to Eton for some years past, and I hear that many improvements have taken place of late."

"Well, why should we not go to-day? It is a bright morning, and we have nothing else to do."

"Agreed," said I; and before half an hour was over we were making our way to the station.

During the journey we both remained silent. I was thinking of old associations and old friends. Gradually I recalled the whole of my schoolboy life my first departure from home, amidst the prayers and blessings of my parents — my feelings of loneliness as I found myself among strange faces — the bitter tears I shed on the first night of my arrival, as I thought of home — the fagging and hardship I underwent, young and delicate as I was. My thoughts passed on to the period when I had risen in the school, when I had formed friendships such as are formed only in boyhood. I was roused from my reverie by the guard shouting "Windsor;" so after waking F — —, we walked down towards the College together.

We entered the schoolyard; not a soul was to be seen, not a sound to be heard.

"I suppose the boys are in chapel," I said. We will wait till the service is over before we go in. In the meantime come with me into Weston's yard; I wonder if I can find my name on the old chestnut tree; I remember carving it soon after I went to Eton. Yes! here it is; but it is hardly visible. The buildings before us were erected a few years ago for the accommodation of those on the foundation; they appear very comfortable. From this spot you can just get a peep of the fine old elms in the playing-fields, with the noble Thames flowing at a little distance. Ah, I see the boys are out of chapel; let us make haste, and go in before the doors are shut."

The old clerk, whom we met with the keys in his hand, was not a bit changed from what he had been ten years before. He wore the same everlasting velveteen breeches and blue stockings, and he shuffled along with apparently the same old shoes, about three sizes too large for him. At my request, he unlocked the door again, and walked into the chapel before us, with his hat on. He seemed to think the edifice was entirely his own, and that he had more right there than all the members of the College put together. I had heard of the improvements which had been made in the chapel, but I was not prepared for such a striking effect as now presented itself. The choir had been greatly enlarged, and new stalls and canopies erected; several of the windows were filled with stained glass; that in the east window had been put up entirely at the expense of Eton Boys. Not the least interesting of the "admonitus locorum" was the monument of Wellesley, who lies here, having been consigned, at his own request, to the earth he had loved so well in life.

We passed from the chapel into the upper school — a handsome room, adorned with the busts of Eton's most illustrious sons. As I gazed upon these, I called to mind the following words from one of the addresses of the excellent head-master of my day, delivered during Lent in the College chapel: — "You who have pursued the same studies, have walked by the same river, have sported under the same trees with Boyle and Pearson, with Chatham and with Grenville — who have drawn eloquence and poetry from the same sources, and in the same air, with Fox, with Wellesley, and with Canning, with Waller and with Gray, must feel that to the mother of such sons no common debt is due." And surely, from these considerations, ought we not to regard our second parent with feelings almost akin to those which unite us with home and all its associations?

"And now," said I to my companion, having lionized the chief objects of interest, we will, if you please, stroll about, and take note of men and manners in this small world. There are one or two "characters" I want to show you. Do you see that man yonder, encased in a brown great-coat, with a jolly, smirking, good-humoured face?

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Well, he is the Oracle of the place. You see him, at the same time that he is keeping his eye upon the basket of fruit which is resting on the wall, telling his various news to a group of youthful listeners, or answering their numerous questions without the slightest hesitation, whether the subject be politics, or cricket—matches, or the history of any Etonian, past or present. You may depend upon it he recollects me; I'll go and ask him. "

"Well, S — — , how are you? I suppose you remember me? "

"Oh yes, sir; to be sure, sir. I was just telling this young gentleman, sir, of the great hit you made in the cricket—match at Lord's, some years ago, sir. By—the—bye, sir, don't you owe me a small — Oh no; I beg your pardon, sir; I was thinking of another gentleman, sir — "

"Come here! " said a gruff voice from behind, to a little boy who was listening, all mouth and eyes, to the Oracle — "Come here, Smith, and take these books up to my room. Look sharp. "

"Now, " said my friend, that is a specimen of your fagging system. Why should not that fellow take his books up to his room himself? "

"Your objections to fagging, my dear F — — , arise from your not clearly understanding the aim and object of the system. It is one of the wholesome regulations of a public school that those who have raised themselves to a certain position should have authority over others inferior to them — not in age or bodily strength, but in mental qualifications. This authority, of which there are various grades, and to which all rise in their turn, is very instrumental in upholding the discipline, which would otherwise require the exercise of a stricter surveillance on the part of the masters. "

"But are there not many who abuse this power by employing it in a capricious and unjust manner? I have heard, moreover, that those who have suffered most as fags, have become, as soon as they possess authority themselves, the most tyrannical towards their inferiors, pleading as their excuse the example of their former masters! "

"Of course there are exceptions to every rule; doubtless there are some who have no feeling of personal responsibility towards those set over them; but this is not often the case. With regard to your last objection, I think bullying has a tendency to bring out a boy's character in a true light; if he be well disposed, the recollection of his own sufferings will make him kind to his inferiors; if, on the contrary, he be of a rougher and harder temper, the remembrance of what he has himself undergone will embitter him towards others. After all, I have not mentioned the most conclusive argument in favour of fagging; it is a fact established on long experience, that in those schools in which no legitimate authority is acknowledged, bodily strength exercises a tyranny far more oppressive. "

"Well, I dare say you are right. I never viewed the matter in that light before, — and now what do you propose to do? "

"Let us attend the afternoon service in the chapel and then go to hear the debate in "The Eton Society. " "

"What is the nature of "The Eton Society? " "

"It very much resembles "The Union " at Cambridge and Oxford, consisting of about twenty—five members, who are elected by ballot from the upper part of the school. They meet once a week for the purpose of holding debates on historical or political subjects. You will find a tolerable library there, and most of the daily papers. I think the society was founded about forty years ago; since which time its list of former members can show the names of several eminent statesmen. I am an honorary member, and I will ask the President to admit you to the debate. "

Accordingly, at the appointed time F — — and I presented ourselves at "The House " (for it is a miniature House of Commons), and sat down to listen to the proceedings. I forget what was the subject for discussion: but three or four gentlemen rose and spoke very well, and were followed by five or six who "perfectly agreed with the honourable member who had opened the debate, " etc. etc. I was very much amused by one short stumpy fellow, who advanced with a broad grin on his face, and was encouraged by cries of "Here! here! " from all sides. He was evidently the wag of the House. There was a pale—faced youth, who contradicted everybody, and lastly himself. Altogether it was a very animated scene, and when the order was given for strangers to withdraw, I felt sorry it was so soon over.

"What do you think of Eton orators? " I inquired of F — — , as we walked down stairs together.

"I think most of them spoke very well. One or two of them, however, appear great Radicals. "

"Oh, never mind that. They will change their opinions in the course of a few years. But I see it is time for us to

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be off. Have you seen enough of Eton? "

"I have seen enough to give me very favourable impressions both of Eton and Eton boys. The sight of those noble elms, those time-honoured towers, in a word, the whole scenery, calculated as it is to awaken the poetical parts of one's nature, has made me cease to wonder at the well known elegance of Eton scholarship. But what has struck me particularly is, that the boys appear so gentlemanlike — "

"You are right, my dear F — — It has often been remarked, both at the Universities and elsewhere, that there is a *je ne sais quoi* in an Eton man which distinguishes him wherever he goes, and stamps him as a gentleman at once. This accounts, in some measure, for the sort of freemasonry which exists among all Etonians, past or present, as children of one common mother. It is natural, certainly, that every man should feel an interest in the place of his education; but I think the feeling is particularly strong in the breast of one brought up at this school. Those who have long since entered on life, whose hearts have been seared with the cares and trials of the world, still view with pleasure and sympathy their youthful brethren engaged in the same studies and pursuits as were once that their own; still consider the honours gained from time to time by present Etonians reflect credit on themselves, as members of the same household. "All of us " (I quote the words of one who has himself contributed in no small degree to the common treasury of Eton wealth), "all of us, young and old, rejoice at the reports which reach us from the distant East, of the wise and brave deeds of those who are one with us in the name of Etonians. We fondly trace the steps of the Missionary Bishop surrounded by the savages whom he has Christianized, thankful that God's kingdom has been so extended, but thankful too that it is by one of us that the holy work is accomplishing. The righteous administration of justice from the lips of one of our own brethren, sounds more familiar to our ears than those of any other, however distinguished. The noble sentiments that fall in the senate from the lips of one of our own statesmen, strike a responsive chord in our hearts, and are cherished there as no other words however eloquent, no other thoughts, however forcible and true. We are indeed, and long may we be, a strongly-united brotherhood. " "