

# **Fear for the Future**

Elizabeth Gaskell

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It has happened that for the last five—and—twenty years I have lived altogether out of "the world." Of course, an intelligent reader will understand what I mean by the expression. I haven't been staying in Sirius, nor making the tour of the Great Bear. But circumstances have combined to keep me and my dear wife and family in a remote corner of this busy England whereto the clash and clamour of its onward progress has penetrated but imperfectly, and wherein our experience of society has been limited in extent and primitive in quality.

Not but that we have been very happy, in spite of our disadvantages and privations. Our utmost dissipation in the winter time (our social season), consisted in going to tea among our one or two neighbours and playing a rubber at whist in the evening; or at Christmas time. Around game at vingt-un or speculation for the children. The pretty speckled beans of the scarlet runners were our counters, and a penny per dozen the rate at which we gambled. What excitement there used to be over those momentous stakes, and what laughing and fun! Yes: we enjoyed those festivities, and thought them very pleasant. People don't know the true worth of a pack of cards who have never lived in the country, five miles from a post town, and in the midst of a small social circle, wherein the desideratum is to obtain the greatest amount of amusement at the smallest intellectual expense.

Still, though I repeat we were very happy, with our summer picnics and our winter card-playing — still, it will easily be perceived that our "life" for twenty years past has been a very different sort of thing from what you London people call by the same name. And no doubt it is simply natural that now we have temporarily emerged from our seclusion; now that we are in this great metropolis staying on a visit, and going about as country visitors usually do, doubtless, it is only to be expected that we should be very much astonished at many things we see — that we find nothing as it used to be, and are perpetually involved in bewilderments and perplexities. But there are some phases of this changed aspect of things which more than perplex; they alarm me. Some metamorphoses in the state of affairs which have taken place "since my day cause me, I must own, serious uneasiness.

I have got over my first surprise and dismay at a good deal. Different as evening parties are from the routs and assemblies of my youth, I can now "assist" at one without making my eyebrows ache with perpetual astonishment, or tiring out my intimate friends by my continual questions. It no longer overwhelms me to hear a gentleman, in asking a lady to dance, abrogate all the chivalrous old-fashioned ceremony of petition with which I used to prefer that request; nor, when the free and easy invitation is accepted, does it quite shock me out of my self-possession to see the cavalier enfold the lady in his embrace, and then whirl her off at a speed and in a fashion at which the more dignified maidens of thirty or forty years ago would have been both frightened and ashamed. I have grown accustomed also to the wonderful spectacle of a lady in evening dress. I can regard it at last with tolerable composure, though I admit it was long before my old-fashioned eyes could patiently endure the sight of that head about which hangs such a mass of tropical vegetation; or the extraordinary incongruity of that vast and voluminous extent of skirt, and marvellously scanty provision for sleeve, and what my wife, I believe, calls corsage. I don't marvel now, when the guests that were invited at eight o'clock don't appear till eleven; and I have ceased to be distressed by people of moderate means and small-sized houses, persistently and periodically inviting a hundred and fifty of their fellow-creatures to cram themselves into an apartment designed to afford comfortable sitting room and breathing space for about a third of that number. Nor do I now look wildly for supper towards the clock of these entertainments, though I admit I did at first; for standing for five consecutive hours is hard work, particularly when singing has to be listened to all the time; and exhausted nature does, I must

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say, crave for some refreshment beyond the thin biscuits and weak negus which are served out in the china closet down—stairs, on such occasions at these festive mansions. At Slowington, now, our card parties were always wound up a famous supper, when at least thrice the amount of comestibles that could possibly be consumed by the number of visitors, were ranged upon the board. There — the scarcity always was of people to partake, and not of things to be partaken. The style of hospitality prevalent in this modern Babylon is certainly much more ethereal — wine and water, biscuits, and "jam," as my son Charles says, is all you need expect at these crowded reunions. Well, I'm getting used to it; and by dint of fortifying myself with a solid meal beforehand, manage to get creditably through similar severe evenings.

But there are other changes than these, that have taken place within this quarter century, to which all my philosophy is unable to reconcile me. These changes are not of that class which simply affect dress, manners, or customs. Humanity itself comes under their influence; and the great soul of Womanhood especially, seems to me to be no less altered from what it used to be, than is its external appearance. It is this which excites my most lively apprehensions. As the father of six boys, all of whom I hope one day to see husbands of wives and fathers of families, I feel particularly interested in the younger generation of women now growing up around us. And in no one particular do I find that "world" from which I have thus long been isolated, so signally changed as among them.

I miss everything I have been accustomed to meet with, in these charming members of the great human family. I could almost imagine they had become a different race of beings altogether. In my time girls were romantic, addicted to falling in love, and to wasting their time over novels and letterwriting. Their worst foible was apt to be love of admiration; their most perilous tendency one towards thin shoes and young officers. In a word, they were a thoughtless, foolish, bewitching, loving, helpless, irresistible set of creatures, in whom one saw at a glance all that was faulty or pernicious; and found out more and more with every day of closer intimacy the great underlying wealth of worth and goodness.

I know it was so in my case. My wife was a slender young thing of seventeen when I first made her acquaintance. What nonsense we used to talk in the moonlight, leaning out on the balcony of her father's house, till we were summoned in and reprimanded for our imprudence! What colds she used to catch, walking with me along the banks of the river after sunset, clad in a muslin dress and lace pelerine! When I quoted poetry (sometimes Byron's but more frequently my own, which she preferred), how she listened, her blue eyes fixed on my face, in breathless admiration and delight! When I played the flute, (dreadfully out of tune, I've no doubt, and looking anything but sublime in the act), how innocently charmed she always was. Many a day she has asked me to play "The Thorn" and "The Manly Heart" six or seven times over. There's enthusiasm and sentiment for you! Then how shy and timid she was! I think it was in helping her to cross the stream by a narrow plank one day, that I lost my heart irretrievably. The way in which she clung to my arm, the bewildering helplessness with which she looked at me with those dove—like eyes — ah, it was irresistible! No man could be expected to stand it.

But now—a—day, no such peril menaces masculine bosoms. No, my six dear sons; your peace of mind is little likely to be disturbed by similar feminine attractions. Nothing of that kind is characteristic of the female nature of this present time. The pretty ignorance, the fascinating helplessness, the charming unconsciousness that enslaved us bachelors of long ago — where are they all gone to? Where is the graceful weakness that appealed so eloquently to our awkward strength; where the delicious unreasonableness that so subtly flattered our logical profundity; where the enthusiastic romance that seemed expressly to temper and balance the matter-of—fact worldliness inevitable more or less to the nature of the masculine animal which has to work for its living? Where, I ask, in eager anxiety, for the sake of my six boys?

As for Romance, it has had its day. Young women in whose fresh untutored minds and generous hearts it had known from time immemorial its sure stronghold and sanctuary, have gone over in a body to the enemy, and now range themselves under the brown banner of Matter of Fact, Stern Reality, and Common Sense. They no longer pore over Byron and Lamartine, delight in moonlight and solitude, and the sacred sympathy of one congenial

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spirit. They study McCulloch and Adam Smith, and light the candles directly it is too dusk to read or write. Moreover, they have grown gregarious in their habits; they incline towards Committees, and take pleasure in Associations. They know too much about sanitary laws, and pay too great attention to them, ever to think of such things as moonlight rambles, or meditations after dark at an open window. The Juliets of the nineteenth century would entirely decline holding any clandestine communication with Romeos from a balcony. In the first place, they would consider it weak and nonsensical, and secondly, they wouldn't like to risk catching cold. They have a wholesome consideration for rheumatism and catarrh, — disorders which the damsels of my day regarded with lofty and incredulous disdain. As for thin shoes, except for dancing, they appear to have altogether vanished from the feminine toilet. "Balmoral" boots, soles half an inch thick, and "military heels" have usurped their place. Those boots, and the martial red petticoats now so familiar to every eye, are to me eloquent manifestations of the change that has come over the spirit of womanhood. They are sensible, strong, and matter of fact; just as the thin slippers and muslin robes of old time were foolish, fragile, and poetical. I suppose the influence on the statistics of female health under this new regime must be considerable. All very well; but when I was a young man the notion of statistics in connection with a woman would have appeared to me almost profanely impertinent.

Again, looking back on those long past days, I recollect how few were the acquirements, how limited the information, of the fairer half of humanity. I know they generally employed themselves indoors with wool-work, harmless flower-painting, or a little gentle music. I never heard of anything more profound than these forming their pursuits. Few among them were readers (at least of aught but novels and poetry), and as for writing, they used to write "letters" with much state and ostentation, retiring to their own rooms for the purpose, and occupying whole long mornings in crossing and re-crossing divers pages of fair paper with those long-tailed straggling characters of theirs. No exigencies of "writing for the press" had as yet cramped their free flowing caligraphy. No ideas of original composition had ever entered their innocent heads. They detailed the events of their daily lives, they repeated their mild sentiments and innocuous platitudes in these latticed-worked epistles with the most contented self-complacency, never dreaming that anything better or wiser could be required of them. They were women, the helpmates, consolers, and adornments of our homes; like the lilies, they toiled not, but fulfilled the end of their existence, being lovely and pure amid the coarser and more useful herbs of the field.

But now! What modern young woman, of average ability and education, who is not at least a "a writer" in some magazine, or probably yet more ambitious, the author of a book, be it novel in three volumes, travels in two, or poetry in one? As for the exceptionally clever among their sex, such light labours in literature no longer content them. They attack science, and produce authoritative tomes, books of reference, to be regarded with awe by all men, on the several subjects on which they have brought their minds to bear. Or they devote their energies to politics, indite fierce "leaders" in newspapers, and make themselves obnoxious to sundry continental governments. I need hardly say, that like all respectable country gentlemen, I am a staunch Conservative, and it at once adds to my alarm, and confirms my unfavourable impression of this new state of things, when I find that all these female politicians are furious Radicals and Reformers.

What do you suppose are my feelings when I look around me at an evening party, inspecting what used to be the brightest ornaments of that social institution — the young girls — and find that, according to my notion and definition of the species, no such creature exists there? No. These are women, old, elderly, middle-aged, pass es, in their prime; young, very young — very young indeed, in years; but as for freshness, the bloom, the artlessness, the timidity, the everything most characteristic of girlhood — all has fled, and is no longer there.

There are plenty of good-looking young ladies, whose toilette is not the most carefully adjusted in the world, and whose hair is arranged in a fashion suggestive of the very probable idea that they were called away just before achieving the desirable ceremony of washing their faces. They are influential members of society; they are presiding influences of sundry Committees and Female Associations for the Alteration of This, the Abolition of That, or the Advancement of the Other. They write pamphlets, and issue manifestoes; they speak at crowded meetings, and take an ardent part in important controversies. They are not really young women — they are Public Persons. Any of my sons, I am quite sure, would as soon think of making love to Lord Brougham or the statue of

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Mr. Canning, as of uttering a word of anything sentimental to these ladies. Moreover, outward appearances can by no means be assumed to be a reliable criterion. At one of the first evening parties which I attended this season, I was greatly attracted by a group of pretty, fair-looking damsels, who seemed to herd together in one corner of the room, chirping like sparrows among themselves — their flower — decked heads nodding and tossing with charming impetuosity, and their little gloved hands gesticulating with fans, bouquets, and handkerchiefs. They appeared to me almost children in years; and something in their aspect quite warmed my disappointed heart with a sense of freshness and sweetness. I assumed the privilege of my age and grey hairs, and approached them, with some conciliatory remark, at once suave, benignant, admiring, and jocose — in fact, couched after the usual manner of old gentlemen to young ladies.

"And what breeze is stirring the flowers?" say I — "what momentous subject is rippling over those rosy lips? Will you admit an old man to your conference?"

At this they all look at me, and then at each other, with sudden seriousness. They are evidently astonished; and presently the rosy lips assume curves not of the pleasantest; and I am conscious, before any reply is vouchsafed me, that these innocent white-robed maidens know what sarcasm means.

"We are talking about our dolls, of course," replies one.

"That subject and dress, are all that ever occupy our minds," says another.

"Now, what did you suppose we were discussing?" a third asks me, laughingly, and with an air of candour that would be very delightful if on such a smooth brow, there were not a suspicion of boldness about it.

"Oh," I rejoin, determined not to fix the theme too low, "I might have thought you were canvassing the merits of the last new song, or picture, or novel. Young ladies now—a-days, are great critics on such matters."

"But we don't talk "shop" when we come out to parties," flippantly observes Nymph No. 1, At which I mystified, not understanding slang: and no doubt I look so, for they all exchange glances again, and laugh, and the candid one obligingly explains.

"You see we all of us either write, or compose, or paint. We are professional artists." But here she broke off suddenly, as another lady came quickly towards us, and said with great earnestness and energy: —

"Mr. — — 's in the other room. Go and speak to him about the Bill. I'll get hold of — — , and attack him."

Off they all fluttered, and I was left stranded in a very blank solitude. Yes, though in the midst of a brilliant crowd, and with the hum and buzz of conversation, and music, and laughter thrilling around me, I confess I felt a strange sense of loneliness creep over me; I seemed to have lived too long: I had ceased to be a part of the things of this present world. I was like a harpsichord tuned to the concert-pitch of a quarter of a century ago, which could take no part in the orchestra of to-day, being utterly discordant with every instrument therein; and while depressingly conscious of my own "flatness," I could not but feel some anxiety as to the issue of this fiercely strung-up, highly-tensioned state of things. What would it all end I experienced a yearning after the little girls of my friend Brown, at Slowington, nice little things in short frocks and pinafores, and I marvelled if they would grow up into women, simply ah, could they do better? or if they would graft on to that fair heaven's work alien growths resulting in something strange and nondescript, like many of those I saw about me then. a don,t deny that I profound, and perhaps an unreasonable melancholy overcame me as I looked round that well-filled room, and took note, individually and collectively, of the fairer half of its occupants. For not the least perplexing element in this new system of perplexing, is to see external characteristics remaining as they were, and musical proportion, grace of form, and delicacy of colouring still marking the broad distinction between the physical nature at least, of women and man. But how long will this lingering remnant of the original idea remain? I thought to myself. Will

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politicians, like that one in pink silk there, who I am told, understands the state of foreign affairs as well as any man living, continue to boast the fresh, shell-like complexion, the lustrous eyes, the winning dimples on the cheek, that I see now? As the mind hardens with its abstruse studies and its bitter experience of practicalities, will not the skin grow coarse and rough, the lines deepen into furrows, and the whole aspect alter, till the outward aspect of a woman becomes feebly masculine, answering to what, as I take it, she is now trying to make her mind? And if so — if this should come to pass — I want to know what is to become of my sons, and other men's sons? Where are they to look, when they go seeking among the daughters of the land that they may take unto themselves wives? How is it to be expected that they will feel towards these public character, who have been working side by side with them in the great arena of business, politics, or science; blackening their faces and roughening their hands in the same hard labour, only with the difference that they have to stand on their tip-toes to reach their fingers to the tool-board, and to run very fast to keep pace with the bigger labourer's show walk? Can it be supposed that my sons and their compeers will continue to regard these anomalous beings with the chivalric deference that conscious strength always feels to conscious helplessness? Are they to be supposed capable of entertaining for them the proper manly feeling of protecting tenderness to the physical weakness, of self-reproaching, half-wondering admiration of the gentleness, purity, and moral strength that in former times used to make women, women? Yet of these peculiar feelings love is born; and I want to know what is to be done when the last blow is struck at them, and they cease to be.

I declare to you (and hence the source of my dismay) that if I were a young man thrown into the society of the present day, I should find myself perfectly incapable of falling in love with any of the young ladies that as yet have come under my notice. I couldn't do it. These followers of the arts, whose life is in the pictures they paint, or the books they write, these scientific damsels who would strike me dumb with a sense of my helpless ignorance if I began to converse with them — these political ladies, above all, who influence the affairs of Europe by their pens, and talk leading articles at you by the hour together if you give them a chance — could I ever feel a tender sentiment for any of these? Does a man fall in love with artist, novelist, mathematician, or politician? No, he doesn't; and the end of all these speculations is, that I turn with a feeling of profound relief and thankfulness to my beloved Alicia, who is, as she always was, neither more nor less than a loving woman, strong enough in mind and body for all a woman's work and duties, but for no more; who would as soon think of picking pockets as of writing books — knows no more of algebra than a flower, or of politics than a skylark. Oh, if I could find six such women for my boys! But I despair of it; I don't believe they exist. Education, cultivation, intellectual elevation, and so forth, have absolutely annihilated the species. Alas, the day!

"Doubtless I shall be deemed illiberal in these lamentations. Doubtless the cry of my heart, Oh, for a little ignorance among women! oh, that their minds were not so expanded and their intelligence so developed!" sounds narrow, selfish, and shallow. Probably I shall find few to echo my wish that the sex was rather what it used to be, with all its weaknesses and follies and shortcomings, than what I dismally fear it is about to become. Be it so. Of course, if the world is satisfied with itself as it goes on, it is all very well for the world, and I must even keep my doubts and discontents buried in my own old fashioned breast.

This once, however, I may surely be allowed to speak out, and unburden my mind of this Fear for the Future.