

The Last Generation in England

Elizabeth Gaskell

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I have just taken up by chance an old number of the Edinburgh Review (April 1848), in which it is said that Southey had proposed to himself to write a 'history of English domestic life.' I will not enlarge upon the infinite loss we have had in the nonfulfilment of this plan; every one must in some degree feel its extent who has read those charming glimpses of home scenes contained in the early volumes of the 'Doctor, This quarter of an hour's chance reading has created a wish in me to put upon record some of the details of country town life, either observed by myself, or handed down to me by older relations; for even in small towns, scarcely removed from villages, the phases of society are rapidly changing; and much will appear strange, which yet occurred only in the generation immediately preceding ours. I must however say before going on, that although I choose to disguise my own identity, and to conceal the name of the town to which I refer, every circumstance and occurrence which I shall relate is strictly and truthfully told without exaggeration. As for classing the details with which I am acquainted under any heads, that will be impossible from their heterogeneous nature; I must write them down as they arise in my memory.

The town in which I once resided is situated in a district inhabited by large landed proprietors of very old family. The daughters of these families, if unmarried, retired to live in on their annuities, and gave the ton to the society there, stately ladies they were, remembering etiquette and precedence in every occurrence of life, and having their genealogy at their tongue's end. Then there were the widows of the cadets of these same families; also poor, and also proud, but I think more genial and less given to recounting their pedigrees than the former. Then came the professional men and their wives; who were more wealthy than the ladies I have named, but who always treated them with deference and respect, sometimes even amounting to obsequiousness; for was there not 'my brother, Sir John —,' and 'my uncle, Mr —, of —,' to give employment and patronage to the doctor or the attorney? A grade lower came a class of single or widow ladies; and again it was possible, not to say probable, that their pecuniary circumstances were in better condition than those of the aristocratic dames, who nevertheless refused to meet in general society the ci-devant housekeepers, or widows of stewards, who had been employed by their fathers and brothers, they would occasionally condescend to ask 'Mason,' or 'that good Bentley,' to a private tea-drinking, at which I doubt not much gossip relating to former days at the hall would pass; but that was patronage; to associate with them at another person's house, would have been an acknowledgment of equality.

Below again came the shopkeepers, who dared to be original; who gave comfortable suppers after the very early dinners of that day, not checked by the honourable Mr D—'s precedent of a seven o'clock tea on the most elegant and economical principles, and a supperless turn-out at nine. There were the usual respectable and disrespectable poor; and hanging on the outskirts of society were a set of young men, ready for mischief and brutality, and every now and then dropping off the pit's brink into crime. The habits of this class (about forty years ago) were much such as those of the Mohawks a century before. They would stop ladies returning from the card-parties, which were the staple gaiety of the place, and who