

Shams

Elizabeth Gaskell

Table of Contents

<u>Shams</u>	1
<u>Elizabeth Gaskell</u>	2

Shams

Elizabeth Gaskell

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

I will not attempt at once to define what is implied by the heading of this paper, because I really do not think we have any term of identical signification, and because, moreover, I am not able to locate — as the Americans would say — my ideas with such promptitude and exactness as to put the right one in the right place at a moment's notice. My meaning must, therefore, unfold itself as I proceed.

Dr. Johnson remarked once upon a time that "some persons would acquire more knowledge in the Hampstead stage than others by taking the grand tour," and he was a wise man in this as in all his other sayings. My discoveries in the way of "shams" have merely arisen from making good use of my eyes; for as I only dwell in the country, though a would-be fashionable city, my opportunities are scanty enough. I see the same faces day after day in the streets, either belonging to idlers or to persons going about their several occupations, while the same old rumble-tumbles daily convey the same old dowagers to their accustomed airing in the public drive. The very beggars are quite familiar to me, from the poor widow who has always got her dear departed husband awaiting burial at the hands of charitable passers-by, to the barefooted rosy-cheeked urchin who tells me has not had a morsel to eat, oh! for ever so long, and winks at a companion round the corner as he thinks he takes me in. These mendicants are shams in their way; but we will let them pass this time. When I go to tea-parties I rarely perceive any novelties among the guests who form their nightly quartets at cards, or play and sing airs which have served as stock pieces during the whole of one season. Beaux being at a premium on these occasions, I have not even the agreeable excitement of noting new flirtations by the way of a change; and we all know that variety is charming.

Thus you must allow that unless I make the most of what passes before my eyes day by day and every day, I may as well close them at once and go to sleep, for all the service they would otherwise be to me. But I flatter myself I am one of the passengers by the Hampstead coach, and never let opportunities slip through my fingers when I can help it. I am not so conceited as to fancy myself a second Spectator, nor should I like my fellow towns-people to shun my society for fear of my discoveries, as the men and women of those times must have dreaded the Argus vision of that very observant individual. But as I have a weakness for "shams," I look out for them diligently, and "when found," I "make a note" of them.

They are, however, so multifarious that it is not easy to form a choice of examples, and state which are genuine and which are — sham. Really I can find no more expressive word, though I fear nobody will have patience to read on unless I endeavour to *chercher mes mots*, as the French have it, better. Yet other people as well as I have doubtless before now experienced a difficulty in obtaining duplicates in our language; and hence perhaps the use of French which some elegant folk affect. Only lately I was reading an article on this subject — where, I am ashamed to own, I forget, for I have not the best of memories — in which it was stated that we ordinary English employ no more than one page in four of our native dictionaries, wherefore our common conversation contains an incessant reiteration of the same phrases. And indeed we all know how badly and ungrammatically most of us converse in our own tongue, whilst we are so dreadfully cautious and fearful of perpetrating blunders and solecisms in a foreign one. Thus the over-correct English of strangers, which is often the mark by which to distinguish them, may afford us some inkling of our mode of speech when we exhibit our native talent for languages, except that as a general rule, we may set ourselves down as the worse speakers of the two. We islanders, when not engrossed by commerce, are so devoted to our Anglo-Latin and Greek that we scorn to waste any precious time in the cultivation of French, not to mention Italian. These are generally expected to come in the hour of need by inspiration, like preaching, or even dancing; and yet with regard to the latter Mr. Motley carefully informs us in his *United Netherlands*, that St. Aldegonde, "a scholar ripe and rare," who had Latin and Greek at his fingers' ends, and "possessed the modern tongues as a matter of course," "was even famous for his dancing, and had composed an intelligent and philosophical treatise upon the value of that amusement as an agent of civilization." I can hardly find a better example in order to persuade Englishmen to dance *imprimis*,

Shams

and afterwards to exhibit their proficiency for the public benefit. I have constantly remarked that good dancers pretend to give themselves airs, and to regard the principal object for which they are invited to balls as quite beneath their notice. They present themselves at the latest possible hour, and then lounge in doorways to show off their figures to the best advantage, or range themselves in the background as mere lookers-on, turning up their refined noses at the follies of their neighbours. Surely such conduct must be tantalizing to those distressed damsels who have been sister-anning it the entire evening. Who has not admired the fortitude of these young ladies in standing beside their chaperones for whole hours, fearing to tumble their flounces or lose a chance by sitting, and hoping always to obtain some reward for their patience?

In process of time their wishes may be gratified, but usually in so questionable a shape that one is inclined to doubt the desirableness of the change; for it is a singular fact that the votaries of Terpsichore are most frequently such as appear least designed by Nature to shine in the dance, but who are nevertheless willing and anxious to undertake anything, from a quadrille to a polka-mazurka. They are generally very young and slender or decidedly short and stumpy, and by way of contrast, invariably select the tallest and best-looking girls in the room. Woe to those who entrust themselves to their guidance on the plea that anything is better than nothing at all! These heroes are impudent shams, and know none of the duties expected of them. Either they rotate in a circle about a foot in diameter, while their unhappy partners are kept screwed up like birds ready trussed for table, from which martyrdom, all stiffness and palpitations, they will soon pray to be released; or else, after wandering wildly like erratic stars, running foul of every couple they encounter, and thereby coming of grief, they suddenly find themselves stretched full length upon the floor, "the observed of all observers."

The young gentlemen of the present day are really remarkable in their way, and deserve some credit for the skill they evince in their getting up. Look at their morning costume! Pork-pies much smaller than the feminine type; coloured shirts that save washing-bills, worn very open at the neck, to exhibit the symmetry of their throats and the evidence of Adam's weakness; small paletots with pegtop sleeves and unmentionables, or knickerbockers and gaiters! They may generally be seen indulging in a cigar or short pipe, even when in female society, and this may account for the undeveloped nature of their conversation, which, to be sure, is not too deep at the best of times. It is usually summed up by, "Awful cold to-day;" "Do you know B — — ? Got a splendid animal!" "Awfully dull, ain't it?" — and so on, their range of words and ideas only embracing about one quarter of every fourth page of the dictionary. They sit, stand, and walk in free-and-easy attitudes that prove they have the full use of their limbs; and at times, when "awfully bored," they yawn and stretch themselves by way of relief. As to ever undergoing the exertion of saluting ladies according to the old-fashioned style of raising the hat, that would involve such a startling amount of bodily labour as not to be thought of for an instant; a nod, or a stick lifted to the brim, answers every purpose quite as well. Nevertheless, these nondescripts flatter themselves they are gentlemen, though I think they are only shams.

"Oh, indeed!" I can hear them exclaim; "and pray, then, what may you call the young ladies of the present day?"

Some of them are shams likewise, but who made them so? Imagination pictures bright, tender, loving beings, all softness, gentle ways, and flowing drapery, and behold instead thereof fast girls; or bad imitations of the genus homo: shams every whit! They are strong about the subject of horse-flesh, laugh at everything, and forswear blushes as being vulgar and commonplace. I am told they can even talk slang, but I confess I have not heard them do so myself, so I conclude they know how to suit themselves to their company. But I know that they skate — well or ill, matters not; wear very short petticoats in the daytime and very low dresses at night; dance the reverse of quietly, and ogle their partners, who are too bored with life in general to return the compliment; and finally, they sum up their accomplishments by making love to the men, as they cannot talk to them into fulfilling their own duty in this respect.

"Certainly not," say these; "a fast girl is all very well for an hour or so to amuse a fellow, but she'll never do for a wife!"

Do you, then, most respectable gents, ever encourage the slow ones? (using the term in contradistinction to fast.) Do you feel happy, nay, at ease, in their society, so as to enable you to smoke, or lounge, or address them as you would their opposites? can you dance and flirt with them as freely, and with a clear conscience bring your club-house atmosphere of cards, wine, and betting into their pure presence? Are they not "awfully slow" in your estimation? Even so, you condemn those unlucky damsels whose direst fault consists in a vain endeavour to

assimilate themselves to your peculiar tastes — (vain, because just as these heroes are only sham gentlemen, so fast women are no more than sham gents); and yet, content with this state of things, you do not aspire to rise to the level of slow girls, ladies by education as well as by birth.

Thank heaven! the homes of Old England still shelter numbers of these; but so long as fast boys and girls divide society between them, they need not regret, as do the Belgravian mothers, that, like sweet violets and fair lilies of the valley, they are suffered to dwell in the shade, unnoticed and unsought.

all this has a vast deal to do with the present very general lament of "nobody coming to marry me, nobody coming to woo!" The wooers cannot get on easily with slow girls, and yet wont put up with fast ones; there is more truth in this than in the charge of extravagance in tastes and attire which these patterns of economy now bring against the poor ladies. Mr. Punch, in his "Ways and Means," has recently taken a fairer view of this vexed question. Horses, cigars and clubs are quite as costly, if not more so, than silks and satins; and those who make use of their eyes as I do, must often have remarked how thrifty the fair creatures have now become in the matter of toilette. Alarmed at the accusation — whether just or unjust they know best — brought against them by those who can find no more cogent excuse for their unwillingness to take to themselves wives, the defendants are racking and taxing their dear little brains to the utmost to find out economical makeshifts. We constantly read such advertisements as "Family Savealls," and "Inquire within upon Everything," and these are supposed to refer only to housekeeping and cookery; but they must also contain sundry "valuable hints upon dress," else how could simple-hearted women be up to the shams they perpetrate?

The other day, while looking about me in the street, I was struck by the appearance of a very fashionably attired lady, whose enormous crinoline displays her richly-trimmed and flounced, or double-skirted, black gown to the best advantage. Revolving this subject of extravagance in my mind, I followed the unknown, and endeavoured to reckon up how many yards of silk might be walking on in front of me. but such a calculation proved for too intricate for one who could never get beyond the rudiments of multiplication; and I could only therefore determine, in a rough way, that a plain dress would have taken half the quantity of stuff and have saved, moreover, the vast amount of ornamentation I saw employed. As I was thus busily occupied we came to a crossing; and the day being a dirty one, my fair friend made careful preparations against accidents. Ladies are always very anxious on this point; indeed, to such an extent as to become totally oblivious that a street is commonly a public thoroughfare traversed by other pedestrians besides themselves. Doubtless they do not care to remark each other's proceedings, but it is different with gentlemen, who, with no petticoats to engross their thoughts and to keep out of harm's way, have full leisure to bestow their attention on other matters. in this age of crinoline, muddy crossings furnish them with a very liberal allowance of ankles on view, some slender and of most bewitching shape; but others, and it must be owned by far the greater number, of very substantial proportions indeed. Being as ready to admire a pretty ankle as any man living, the incognita naturally attracted my notice at this juncture; but in lifting her gown she displayed that which she had not intended to be seen by me, or by any other he or she creature — a very grimy white foundation on which her furbelows were tacked; — so they were only shams, after all! The world was not expected to look beyond the surface, and this, consequently, was alone attended to; but if ladies, intent on making the most of things, decide on wearing shams, I vote for clean ones having the preference, for they would be nearly as economical in the long run, I should say.

Even some of their crinolines are shams, wooden instead of steel hoops being used, as I have painfully discovered by having my unlucky shins bruised black and blue while quietly proceeding about my business out of doors. Not to mention the martyrdom one endures in churches, where eighteen inches or less, in a narrow pew made to hold six, are allotted to each individual. It being supposed, as a mere matter of course, that the said individual has ample space during a couple of hours, in which to stand or sit (flanked by wooden crinolines!) or kneel, and what is more, say his prayers with a mind totally abstracted from the cares and worries of this life. Truly if under these circumstances a man appear to be devout, I number him forthwith among my shams, whatever he may say to the contrary. I don't see why clergymen should not turn an honest penny by their pews as well as other folk, especially as they are more favoured than most professions, as a rule, with olive branches, but I do think that they should do as they would be done by more than others, and while comfortably stretching their own limbs in a pulpit or reading-desk, or within the altar rails, they ought to compassionate the bodily sufferings endured by their congregations, who are severally "cribbed, cabined, and confined," crinolines, hats and all, in about eighteen inches square!

Shams

But whilst enumerating the shams to which the ladies resort in their toilette, I must in fairness point out a novel device adopted by the nobler sex. We have already seen that coloured shirts are often patronized on economical grounds, which some men improve upon by not showing even a line of white above their black stocks. This is always strongly suggestive to me of their being guiltless of linen anywhere, and now, as proof positive in evidence thereof, an individual possessing strong inventive powers, has started an ingenious substitute. The shopwoman at a stationer's who was packing up some envelopes I had purchased, saw my eye attracted by what I took to be linen shirt-collars, marvelling not a little at their being sold at such an establishment.

"Shirt-collars, sir, in paper; first-rate article, sir."

"Paper collars! Nonsense! Who would wear them?"

"Oh! lots of Gentlemen, sir. They are very saving; only cost sixpence a dozen, sir."

"And last, perhaps, for half-an-hour. You must drive a thriving trade at that rate."

"Oh! not at all, sir; one a day would answer quite well. That would be less than sixpence a week, while the washing of several linen collars — "

"I never wear shams," rather testily.

"I beg pardon, sir, I am sure, but so many gentlemen do now-a-days. The washing of several shirts a week must be much more expensive, not to speak of the wear and tear, and original outlay in buying and making up."

There was truth in that, certainly. But imagine the feel of a paper collar; a soldier's stock would be nothing compared to it!

"Can't I tempt you, sir? Many gentlemen — "

I left the shop in a huff at being thought capable of such a thing; sham collars, whether of linen or paper, are an abomination to me, and in consequence my washing bills form a large item in my expenditure. But does anybody actually wear these paper curiosities? Fancy collars intended for ladies' use lay on the counter beside them, and it is natural to suppose that when any article is manufactured in a tolerable quantity, there must be a demand for it. But my ignorance was to be still further enlightened on this subject, for a day or two afterwards I read the following advertisement in the Times: — "Newbury's patent enamel cloth collars and cuffs; reversible, and ladies' collars, from fourpence a dozen." Truly this may be styled the inventive age!

Shams of all sorts stand high in the public estimation. Alack! for our old reputation for honesty. Sham lace half a yard deep is paraded with unblushing effrontery, and sham gold chains, bracelets, and pins are worn by everybody; "they look so well, and are so cheap." That fatal monosyllable has to answer for a vast amount of extravagance. I even think it would be well if the ancient sumptuary laws could be reimposed, notwithstanding that the spirit of the times is all for liberty and equality. There would then be some chance of being able to distinguish genuine ladies and gentlemen from the sham article, which it is now very difficult to do, so long as people — wisely — keep their mouths closed. It were a better feeling if the "gentlefolk" would only patronize ornaments of a certain value, or none at all, but I suppose such a stretch of self-denial would be quite beyond the powers of resistance pertaining to human, or rather woman's nature. Particularly when shop windows contain so much temptation, prices are so low, and when "everybody does it," and fancies that nobody is the wiser.

It may be considered a distinguishing mark when people are simply styled men and women, leaving the ladies and gentlemen to enjoy their newly acquired brevet rank in their own circles. This is a very good test, and almost the only one by which to discern "who's who." Dress counts for nothing; accomplishments are shared in common, music and dancing being thought more useful to ladies than the good old art of making a shirt. The ladies, also, always write a pretty Italian hand; while the women, in this as in everything else, endeavour to step into man's province, and adopt bold round characters. Ladies contrive to spell very tolerably, but invariably break down in conversation when they have to deal with the letter h; and here the women are strong, and turn up their noses ever so little in scorn at their humbled opponents. I am by no means of opinion that the old times were better than the present in everything, but I do think it must have been a comfort to have no sham ladies and gentlemen, and not to have one's cook stipulate for two evenings in the week in which to learn the guitar. When I asked an ironmonger's little girl if she had a doll and worked for it, the mother bridled up and made quick response, that her daughter learnt crochet and knitting, not plain work. Much better have her taught to sew, and cook, and go to market for her mother, and leave crochet, and dancing, and the like, to those who have mere idle time to spend upon them. Even bona fide ladies might with advantage, I think, devote a little more attention to household matters, learn to order a good dinner, and understand how it should be served, nay, cooked. They would then, I can answer for it, know

less about nerves or faintings, and would be too busy and sensible to indulge in rough gallops and skating, sham dress or undress, flirtings, jiggetings, and fast manners. At the same time, I advise young gents to become young men and gentlemen, as being decidedly better style; to shun pegtop trousers, and turn up their collars; to favour pipes and cigars less, and politeness more; and, finally, to sacrifice a larger portion of their idle hours to reading, study, and profitable thought.

One of the amusements of this dolce far niente city, is to attend all the weddings that take place, and as one must start early in order to secure good seats, there is ample time before the ceremony begins to discuss the bride and bridegroom's belongings, the courtship, trousseau, fortune, and prospects of the happy pair. Thus matter for chit-chat is provided for twenty-four hours, a great boon in a place where conversation and idling form the hardest portion of the day's labours. The last wedding I saw appeared to me to be a very smart affair, there being four bridesmaids in a livery, seven carriages with postillions, and the bride herself wearing a wreath and veil. But evidently I was no judge of these things, for we were no sooner outside the church doors, than my party (all ladies) set up a sharp cross-fire of criticisms and fault-finding. "What a shabby turn-out!" "The bride wore only a scanty tulle veil!" "Did you remark what a common material the bridesmaids' dresses were made of?" and so on, till they had to stop to take breath. I profited by the pause to suggest, most deferentially, however, that granting these grave errors in etiquette, I thought the arrangements were somewhat grand, unnecessarily so, indeed, for people who were not over rich, and had not even "great expectations." But, oh dear, no! such ideas were quite antediluvian and wrong. Everybody had a gay wedding now-a-days; besides, most people only married once in their lives, and some (here a little sigh) were denied that solitary chance. So I was silenced if not convinced, for I regard such displays as shams. When there is hardly wherewithal to buy bread and butter and bring up a family, why begin married life with lace veils, carriages, and breakfasts?

Formerly, ordinary folks who were to live respectably on a few hundreds a year, would have gone very quietly to the next church with their nearest relations. The bride would have contented herself with a pretty white bonnet instead of an orange wreath, perhaps even — I am almost afraid to write it — have worn a coloured silk gown in which she could afterwards travel, in lieu of the customary white moire antique which would necessitate a second toilette. One bridesmaid, or two at the most, would likewise have answered every purpose; and yet I doubt whether love was more deficient under those circumstances, or whether young people were less impressed with the sacredness of their vows, and the obligations of the married state, because they did not care to produce an effect which their neighbours would have known to be a sham.

Nous avons change tout cela, is the universal cry. Common sense is out of date, and science, art, poetry, and the rights of women, all very good things in their way, bear rule instead, and unluckily are too exalted in their views to condescend to trifles.

So doth the greater glory dim the less.

The evil rarely ends here, for those who make a sham their starting-point in life, feel called upon to keep up appearances for the rest of their days. Those who marry in silks and satins, with wedding favours, and all the customary paraphernalia, must in due time entertain their friends, which signifies — not eau sucee and conversazione, with which foreigners are well content in their scantily-furnished marble palaces, but — giving them dinners. Now, a good dinner costs a very sensible sum of money, one, too, which might often be spent in a much more satisfactory manner; for however great may be the honour of giving and receiving these ponderous feasts, the pleasure to most of us is doubtful. The host and hostess have been at "agony point" ever since the first invitation was issued: — Who shall be invited? who will accept? and who must replace vacancies? If the scene be laid in the country, there will be fears lest the fish fail to arrive in time; arrangements have to be made for the carriages, horses, and servants of the guests, and a second table provided. Then, on the eventful night the lady, "who sweats under the fatigue of doing the honours of her house" (to quote the world of 1753), has to converse and smile with as easy a countenance as she can assume while the dishing up is keeping everyone waiting; and probably, on entering the dining-room she discovers some dire mischance at the first glance. As to the guests, nine times out of ten they have not been well selected, and therefore show no sympathy for they meet as strangers to each other; and have only the weather to talk about. Perhaps those who would have liked to sit together find themselves sent to opposite ends of a large table; and thus low spirits grow in spite of resistance, and yawns struggle obstinately for liberty of action, though one tries to imagine oneself very happy. Is not this the worst sham, "the unkindest cut of all," for it involves so many sufferers?

Shams

I am always reminded of the words of a very clever friend, who possessed the art of entertaining her guests to perfection, but who detested dinner-parties, as all women do in their hearts — "I like to make my guests happy, but I wish I might send them a guinea a-piece instead of an invitation to dinner!" Yes, I fancy we should most of us prefer making a free gift of the guineas which the fish, and the strawberries, and the early peas cost us, rather than endure the martyrdom of a state affair, particularly when we are keeping up appearances. Alas! for the merrie days of Old England before this system of sham found an entrance into the land. Where are now the friendliness and hospitality which once prevailed amongst us? We have morning calls, when we converse earnestly about the state of the weather; and we leave cards, after watching our dear friends out of their own houses. We receive invitations, but only to a stiff dinner, or to a crowded evening party, because people always wish to make one expense of servants and lights pay off as many debts as possible. I know I must not present myself at a friend's house except at the fashionable hours appointed for visiting, and if by chance I venture earlier I am not asked to stay to luncheon. I am never pressed to join a friendly family meal under a week's notice; and while the husband is doing the civil thing, I perceive a small cloud gathering on his lady's brow, which surely foretells the storm that will follow on my departure. And so even hospitality has become a sham amongst us. The system is universally condemned, and yet every individual contributes his mite towards its maintenance, so easy it is to lay the blame anywhere but on the right shoulders, and so very difficult to get at people's real selves. Gentlemen affect the tastes and manners of grooms; delicate girls try hard to be as masculine as possible; shopwomen and valets are, in their own and in newspaper estimation, ladies and gentlemen; and the daughters of petty farmers leave their plainer mothers to carry the butter to market, while they remain at home to practise the piano. Brown, Esq., whose establishment boasts of a boy in buttons, feels something akin to contempt for his neighbour, Green, Esq., who only keeps a parlourmaid; but meanwhile he is nigh bursting with envy and uncharitableness on remarking a footman in plush unmentionables standing at the door of Robinson, Esq. Thenceforward he strives to keep up the same appearances on his few hundreds per annum that the other does upon as many thousands. He entertains, because "everyone does it;" because all the requisite things can be hired when they are not actually owned, as only one style of dinners is tolerated in good society, no matter its cost. The feast itself is a mere sham, according to Dr. Wynter, who has helped to show us how the old-fashioned notion that "an Englishman's word is his bond," no longer holds good in these days of adulterations.

We feed upon poisons, and are nevertheless surprised at the increase of strange and dire diseases in the land! We are clad in sham goods, for pure silk and wool are almost numbered with the past; and cotton reigns paramount instead. Wherefore, as "it is an ill wind that blows nobody any good," it is to be hoped that if American squabbles produce a scarcity in the cotton market, those persons who are able and willing to pay high prices may have a chance of obtaining genuine articles for their money. We are thus made to purchase various shams nolentes volentes, but where the volens prevails afterwards in the making up, and sham ornaments are superadded, I denounce the guilty parties without mercy. I even believe that to a certain extent our very manners are shams, particularly when we come in contact with our superiors in the social scale, and attempt to cut a dash in the eyes of our less favoured every-day companions. Also when we are most studiously polite in our behaviour and speech, I greatly fear that sham is too often lurking in the background; but who would have the moral courage to confess the sad fact? Yet if there were a little more simplicity and honesty, right feeling and thinking, in the world, how much more happily affairs in general would progress!

One thing, however, is certain, and it is, that I have written with an honest purpose, in the endeavour to expose shams, and induce others to avoid them as I do myself. Who, then, will say that this paper does not contain truth?