

An Old Lady of the Last Century
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AN OLD LADY OF THE LAST CENTURY.

'Tis an often-quoted adage of the celebrated Jewish "lover, king, and sage," that "there is nothing new under the sun." I think that, in the present day, one might rather say "there is nothing old." We are conjugating the verb change, in all its moods and tenses. Coleridge says—

"For what is grey with age becomes religion."

We are atheists to the past, and act upon Wordsworth's principle,—

"Of old things, all are over-old;
Of good things, none are good enough:
We'll help to show that we can frame
A world of other stuff."

Trees, streets are passing 'away as rapidly as their inhabitants, and to-day has nothing in common with yesterday. Marmontel had "*un grand regret pour la fiérie*," and I have *un grand regret* for the old school.

In endeavouring to recall a few memorials of Mrs. Lawrence Burgoyne, I do it on the same principle that scientific men collect the bones of a mammoth—the whole exists no longer; but there are sufficient remains to show that it did exist. The few survivors of the old school, such as are kept alive by having life annuities—a plan which has some secret charm for putting off death—even these few are fast disappearing. Mrs. Burgoyne has been dead these two years; she had borne a great deal. Powder and hoops had been left off, guineas had changed into sovereigns, and, like many other things, lost by the change; but the last shock to her nerves was given by her granddaughter. Miss Ellen, an urchin of some six years old, came to see her grandmother during the Christmas holidays. Mrs. Burgoyne having heard that the child was a quiet one—though she had some misgivings about the matter—prepared a book for her entertainment; it was a volume of Mother Goose's Fairy Tales. Plum cake and sweet wine were duly administered in the first instance, and the cat recommended as a playmate in the second: the cat, however, being declined, the book was produced. The young lady opened the pages—turned them over with a solemn air of contempt—and then, throwing the work aside, begged that "she might have something to read that would improve her mind." Her grandmother never got over the shock—but took to her bed, ejaculating "What will this world come to! Improving her mind at six!—why, at sixteen I did not know whether I had a mind or not!"

Mrs. Burgoyne passed the last twenty years of her life in a large, solemn-looking house at Kensington; it is now a mad-house. How curiously do these changes in dwelling places, once cheerful and familiar, bring the mutability of our existence home! It would be an eventful chronicle, the history of even a few of the old-fashioned houses in the vicinity of London. You ascended a flight of steps, with a balustrade and two indescribable birds on either side, and a large hall, which, strange to say, was more cheerful in winter than in summer. In summer the narrow windows, the black wood with which it was panelled, seemed heavy and dull; but in winter the huge fire gave its own gladness, and had besides the association with old English hospitality which a blazing grate always brings. You passed next through two long drawing-rooms, whose white wainscoting was almost covered with family portraits.

There cannot be much said for the taste of Queen Anne's time downwards—bagged, wigged, and hooped; there was not a picture of which the African's question might not have been asked, "Pray tell me, white woman, if this is all you?" The floors were dry-rubbed, and the mahogany tables shone as if in recollection of former festivities, when whole nights floated away like the

"Hydaspes, dark with billowy wine."

The chairs were high-backed and the seats covered with needle-work: there was also a buffet, through whose glass doors appeared some singularly small tea-cups, and some still more singularly small tea-pots—why, it would take a dozen to fill one of our modern breakfast cups. The third was Mrs. Burgoyne's own room—and here comfort had made some encroachment on precedent; indeed it was needed by her bodily weakness. The room was carpeted—books and various trifles were on the table, and in an arm-chair was seated the old lady herself: her tall figure was still unbent, and the aristocratic hand was still white: she had no peculiarity of costume, unless it was its extreme propriety—she was, indeed, the very beau-ideal of black satin and blonde. I think it cost her the bitterest pang of all to part with her train, it was like going a grade lower in society. Still, to use her own remark, "It is better to be anything rather than conspicuous: never meet the fashion, but always follow it." She had been a beauty and an heiress, and had gone through life on the sunny side. Tombstones had been her only monitors; but the deep sorrow of death brings with it deep sympathy. Opposite to her were hung the portraits of her husband and her only daughter, whom she had lost very young; but for such humanizing distress, her nature might have been hardened in its glittering course of worldly prosperity—but with her, the well of tears had opened too deeply ever to dry again. On a little ebony table at her elbow were placed her bible and prayer-book, in which she read the psalms and lessons every morning; a friend fancying it was bad for her eyes, somewhat foolishly remonstrated, and asked if she had always done so? "My dear," said the old lady, "youth forgets what age never does—its Maker."

Mrs. Burgoyne was cheerful, and fond of society; in the morning she had a levée of visitors, and twice a week at least, a little circle gathered round her of an evening. Then she was seen to advantage. Some one says of cleanliness, that it is next to godliness—the same might be said of politeness. Mrs. Burgoyne's good-breeding was the most perfect thing in the world—I cannot even imagine her saying or doing a rude thing; I do not believe that she ever even thought one. Her manner was as polished and as minutely finished as the carving on an ivory card case: a little stately it might be, and her curtsey belonged to the days of hoops and brocades—her curtsey was the only old fashion she could not give up—still it put you at your ease; she knew well how to encourage, and she had too much good taste, I might add good feeling, ever to patronize. There never was a more exquisite listener; with what graceful patience would she endure the most wearisome stories—with what quickness catch the least attempt at wit, often giving the said attempt some nice turn, of which the originator was quite guiltless—not that she was the least of a *bel esprit*. She spoke with admiring deference of Mrs. Montagu and Mrs. Carter's coteries, but she had never belonged to them; she had just the most delicate dread in the world of being called

clever. Indeed it is a doubtful fact whether clever people are ever very agreeable; they are too much absorbed by one particular pursuit, to bound lightly enough over those generalities which are the stepping-stones of conversation; they feel as if they ought to say something worth remembering. Now carelessness in the talker is what most puts the listener at ease with himself. In some cases it seems a duty to recollect, and we all know what disagreeable things duties are.

Mrs. Burgoyne, on the contrary, was simple and *naïve* to the age of eighty. Her talents had never been overlaid; indeed she used to enjoy quoting a speech which the Duchess d'Abrantes puts into the mouth of her mother, the prettiest and most fascinating *femme à la mode* that ever took her degrees in *la haute science* of French *coquetterie*. Mde. de Permon says, "Je n'ai jamais lue d'ouvrage plus grave que *Télémaque*, et je ne suis pas trop ennuyeuse moi!" Our kind hostess rarely stirred from her arm-chair; but that served as an excuse to draw near to herself any one who needed encouragement: none but those who have keen feelings of their own can enter into those of others, and this susceptibility in her was cultivated by that constant attention which is the most difficult lesson of good breeding. Mrs. Burgoyne was proud—but her very pride showed itself in respect—she only claimed what she herself was ready to yield: her theory was comprised in her favourite anecdote of the late Lord Besborough. While getting into his carriage one day, a poor woman asked charity; he gave her a shilling, but it dropped into the mud: he instantly stooped down, picked it up, and wiped it with his handkerchief before he put it into her hand.

The little circle that used to gather round her is now dispersed—the loss of Mrs. Lawrence Burgoyne has been felt by many; sympathies and affections lingered with her to the last. I know no one remaining the least like her. The vault of her Norman ancestors has closed over the kindest friend and the most thorough-bred gentlewoman.

L. E. L.
