

THE CHILDREN'S
DAY IN
THE COUNTRY.

"Go out, children, from the mine and from the city;
Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do;
Pluck you handfuls of the meadow cowslip pretty,
Laugh aloud to feel your fingers let them through."

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

NO one who is unacquainted with the overcrowded, stifling homes of the children of the City, can imagine their rapturous delight at a "Day in the Country." People who see God in nature continually, are astonished at the ever-multiplying appeals, as summer approaches, for funds to enable every poor child in London, if possible, to enjoy at least one day annually amidst fields and flowers, and beneath the blue depths where the lark "sings at heaven's gate." They would wonder no longer could they see the eager, appealing faces of tens of thousands of children when the prospect of this day is spread before them, and hear their entreating voices say, "Teacher, shall I go—and I—and I?" It is impossible to estimate the purifying and humanising effects of these treats, or the happy memories they bring to the little ones in their dark rooms, even when over and gone. Still less can one estimate the misery of those who, for the lack of funds or other causes, are perforce left at home. The hope of this one blissful day has been known to keep many a ragged child diligent through the three hundred and sixty-five; while the loss of it has driven some, in a sort of revengeful desperation, to theft or other misdemeanours. It has been found that rewards are far more effectual than punishments, and that there is no stronger incentive to religion and virtue, than a sight of the works of that Great Creator who originally formed man for a sinless and happy existence.

Perhaps a simple and truthful account of one "Children's Day in the Country" may serve better

than many homilies to illustrate this; and when it is remembered that from every quarter of London flocks of children issue, year after year, in search of similar enjoyment, none need wonder at the continuous appeals for funds.

We start from the West-end, where the extremes of riches and poverty meet. Several hundred children, with their numerous voluntary helpers, assemble at a large school-house in a poor neighbourhood, within a stone's-throw of a fashionable square. They file down numerous back streets into Oxford Street, where they form into a long procession. Piloted by a policeman, whose arm is law, they cross the Circus into Regent Street, on their way to Charing Cross. It is nine o'clock, and London is alive with men hurrying hither and thither to business. All pause for a moment to glance at the stream of young folks, with their teachers, banners and tissue plumes, and perchance to thank God for so promising a sight.

Arrived at the station, they soon fill the numerous carriages provided for them, and we find ourselves in one, surrounded by a few score of the noisy, happy crew, and honoured too by the undeserved title of "teacher." As such we receive many confidences.

"I was never in a train before. What a noise it is! I'm frightened, teacher," cries one little girl, laying a hand on our arm. "Shall we see a real green field? Lor! I never see one," she adds ecstatically.

"Is that the Thames? My! I never see the Thames," exclaims a boy, his shock head far out of the window.

"I have!" retorts another, elbowing him. "I've been on it, when I went to see brother as was in hospital on the Thames."

"Here's London Bridge!" exclaims a third.

"No, it ain't London Bridge; it's Victoriar. I see 'Victoriar Hotel' wrote up."

A dispute arises.

"Are we going ten mile, teacher?" asks another.—

"Thirty."—"Do you hear? We're a-going thirty mile!"

They all begin to dance and sing.

"There's turnips," cries a lad, pointing out of the window.

"Here's Turnips," returns another, seizing a neighbour's hair, who glances round with a grin.

We ask an explanation.

"We calls this here un Turnips, because his hair's white," is the response, followed by a generally uproarious laugh.

Several begin to eat. Bread and butter and biscuits seem plentiful, and they have mostly left their various abodes before breakfast, too excited for food. We remark, however, that such as have none are silently patient.

"I hadn't time for breakfast, so mother give it me," confides the little girl who has never seen a field, taking edibles from a shabby black bag.

"I haven't had no victuals to-day," pleads a black-eyed boy, with his hair sticking like bristles through a hole in his cap.

The little girl instantly shares her meal with him, though evidently a stranger to him, and he sticks to her closely for the remainder of the journey. She is shabbily though cleanly clad, one stockingless foot protruding through her boot.

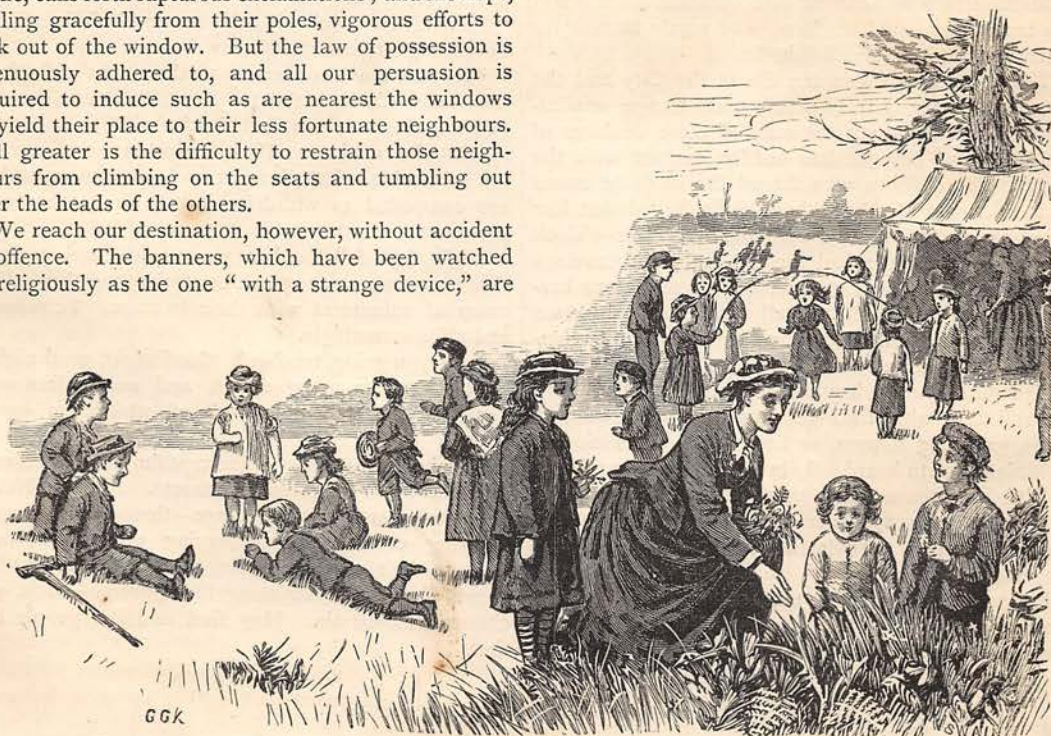
It is a glorious day. The corn, almost ready for the sickle, calls forth rapturous exclamations; and the hops, trailing gracefully from their poles, vigorous efforts to look out of the window. But the law of possession is strenuously adhered to, and all our persuasion is required to induce such as are nearest the windows to yield their place to their less fortunate neighbours. Still greater is the difficulty to restrain those neighbours from climbing on the seats and tumbling out over the heads of the others.

We reach our destination, however, without accident or offence. The banners, which have been watched as religiously as the one "with a strange device," are

unfurled, a procession is formed at the station, and the motley assembly march up a sandy, tree-fringed lane. We remark with interest how the hale protect the halt. A boy on crutches, another half blind, with bandaged eyes, a girl with her foot in irons, are kindly and unselfishly helped along. One pale child in black, sheltered by her elder sister, attracts particular attention. Her poor hand has been burnt to a stump and is not yet healed. The elder girl's tale is sad enough, told as she keeps the maimed arm carefully towards her, and puts her own round the little one's neck.

"Her pinnerfore caught fire," she says. "She was two years in hospital, and they wanted to take her arm off; but mother had her home, and it's healing nicely. She dresses it herself every morning, when mother goes to work at six o'clock. I've been in service ever since I was eight. I'm sixteen now, and have only seen mother eight times in those years. I came home yesterday to bury my eldest sister; she was nineteen. Father's a chaff-cutter, and has lost his fingers like my little sister. My mistress is just dead, but I shall soon get another place; she always let me attend school, and come for the treat. I'd sooner lose anything than the treat."

Protector and protected walk on with the rest; but their pale faces haunt us. The elder looks twelve rather than sixteen, and we feel that many "days in the country" would be good for both. But griefs and pains are soon forgotten in hedge-way flowers, not one of which is left to "waste its fragrance," but is plucked, however common or humble, as soon as seen. A jewel



could scarcely call forth as much happiness as these floral

"Gems that in earth's firmament do shine."

The place of our ultimate destination is a broad heath, which terminates the hilly, sandy lane. It does one good to hear the shout of joy that resounds as we first tread the short turf, and see the grand, wide play-ground. Two white tents and many amusements have been provided. Skipping-ropes, long and short, are soon in motion; cricket and foot-ball begin, and "round dances" follow. There is a magnificent erection of a swing with two chairs, in which each child who produces a ticket is to have two turns; but, alas! we hear several bemoaning the loss of their passport to this aerial voyage, and thus learning a lesson of carefulness. Nevertheless, the broad, blue, sun-gilt sky smiles cheerfully on much innocent enjoyment.

"Teacher, I'm so hungry. When shall we have dinner?" is the result; and dinner is served punctually at one.

It is a veritable *fête champêtre*. A circle is formed that spreads wider and wider, like the rippling circle on a lake, the little people forming the fairy-ring; grace having been sung, huge clothes-baskets overflowing with meat-pies appear, and a pie large enough for the largest appetite is given to each by the willing "lady and gentlemen helps." Even while these are being demolished, the question arises, "Shall we have a fruit-pie, teacher?" and in due time the coveted second course appears. Currant, gooseberry, and cherry turnovers are distributed, also of large dimensions; and no better comment on the abundant feast is needed than the emphatic, if not refined, "Teacher, I'm so full!" that succeeds it.

Meanwhile a well-earned cold collation is spread in the tent for the said teachers, who regale themselves when the children have finished.

The contrast between the din of the City and the peace of Nature is truly great; and strange, wondering thoughts must stir the souls of these denizens of the one, thus brought into sudden contact with the other. The children who thread the intricate mazes of the London streets without difficulty, almost fear to stray alone into this solitude. As five o'clock draws near, we are asked for the time; the cravings of Nature being, as is natural, felt where Nature herself is all-powerful. So we all turn tentward—some speeding to their meal, others lagging behind, reluctant to bid farewell to waving corn, majestic trees, golden gorse, purple heather, and elastic turf. Many are still afar with their teachers, exploring tangled paths, gathering flowers, or listening to the melodies of birds, hitherto heard only in their miserable prisons in Bird-fair, or some other equally dreary City aviary.

"I hope we may come again next year," are the words uttered as the reluctant feet move slowly over the broad heath.

But another large living circle soon spreads, and a genuine "five o'clock tea" commences, preceded by a shoal of white mugs. Each child holds one and sits

expectant. Again the clothes-baskets appear, filled with huge rounds of bread and butter, and accompanied by fountains of tea. These are succeeded by an ample supply of excellent plum-cake, and the appetites are equal to the occasion. Baskets and fountains are emptied and refilled until all are satisfied.

We wander round the ring, and remark that two-thirds of the children are stowing away untasted cake.

"My little brother couldn't come, and I'm taking him mine," apologises one.

"This is for father and mother," explains another.

We are delighted to see our unselfish little friend of the morning with her shabby black bag full of scraps.

"I've eight brothers and sisters at home, please, teacher, and I've had plenty," she says. "And I've run for a ball and got un for the baby." She displays ball and scraps triumphantly. We had seen her secure the former, despite the foot protruding from the boot. "Oh! I've had such a happy day," she adds, fastening the refractory bag.

"And so have I—and I," echo her neighbours. "And we've had such a tea, so hot and strong and sweet—and such good bread and butter—and, my! such jolly good cake. 'Twas better than the dinner. I wish we could stop here all night, and to-morrow and Monday."

Thus ends our "Day in the Country." The roll-call sounds, the banners unfurl, and we again file down the sandy lane, the cool evening breeze pursuing us from the downs. We are all as brisk as when we started, and "wait for the train" with undiminished loquacity. When it arrives there are not enough third-class carriages for the large party, so a little flock is folded in a saloon carriage.

"Come here, teacher!" cries our unselfish little friend, beckoning us from the window.

We find ourselves amongst them, but only for a moment. We hear them exclaim, "My eye, here's a go!" and see them loll back, with folded arms, against the cushions. Their importance and attitudes are inimitable. But there is no room for us, and we are compelled to withdraw hastily to another compartment.

Night has fallen when we reach Charing Cross. Our troop turns out upon the station together with a troop of volunteers with their banners. Fern-fronds and rifles commingle.

"Are you going, teacher? Good night, good night!" salutes us from many voices, and numberless small hands are stretched out, all of which we cannot grasp.

Marshaled by their police-captain, they once more thread the now lamp-lighted streets. Past the Nelson Column—past the garish shops—through the surging, hurrying crowds, the unflagging procession winds. Back to their courts and alleys—back to their stifling rooms—back to their struggling poverty—back, perchance, to their sin. May God and His people help them!