



THE EXCURSION.

ALTHOUGH we have, in a preceding page, attempted to convey a slight idea of the pleasures which are sometimes to be met with at a picnic on a large scale, we must confess that our own experience leads us rather to distrust them *a priori*. It is not an easy thing to collect together a considerable number of people who shall assimilate well, as a whole, for an entire day, with no leading object of attraction beyond the face of nature. Such things are certainly to be found, as a perfectly harmonious assemblage of persons in search of the picturesque; but we are disposed to regard such a piece of good fortune, when it does occur, as rather the exception than the rule; for though every member of the party may wear an unclouded brow, and even affect an air of hilarity, the initiated, who look beyond the surface, will often see cause to mistrust these fair appearances, and the result is at least doubtful when more than half a dozen persons resolve to spend a day together quietly in the country. But how difficult it will always be found to limit a pleasure party to those few with whom the idea originated. The preparation deemed necessary for passing a few hours from home becomes disproportioned to the exigencies of the case, and then it appears desirable to enlarge the plan, and admit a few more to its enjoyments; this once agreed upon, each one has a dear friend or charming acquaintance to propose, whose society would prove a real acquisition. To deny so small a request would seem churlish indeed, and thus the original one or two form but the nucleus of an extensive gathering. A small party, of congenial tastes and habits of thought, carry with them their own elements of enjoyment, but who can answer for the assimilative properties of friends' friends? We often take most kindly to those whose characters are most individual;

hence the very qualities especially attractive to ourselves, may be those least generally social; yet, how often are such persons ruthlessly drawn into almost a family circle, with whom they have not a single bond of union, and by whom their admirers expect them to be as cordially received, and as thoroughly appreciated, as though they had been known to them for years. That love may spring up at first sight, we have had many a proof; but friendship, though demanding a lower temperature, requires more time to mature it. Alas! how manifold are the probabilities against securing a few hours' perfect enjoyment, in the shape of a pre-arranged expedition into the country. The anticipated day may perchance be fine, but if the company be fine also, adieu to the charm of the excursion; for the gay *persiflage*—the witty repartees—the *esprit de société*—admissible, if not always attractive, in the sphere of the drawingroom, seem most congenial to an atmosphere of *maréchale* and *patchouli*, and recall that conventional life from which, on an expedition of this description, it is the chief ambition of the moment to escape.

There is, however, a description of Excursion, which being of a more unpretending character than the Pic-Nic, is less liable to the accidents arising from external circumstances. We refer to the water party; not implying by this expression, the union of a yacht, a champagne luncheon, a crew of amateur sailors, and a bevy of nymphs in gossamer; but a trim boat on a fair stream; a little band of some half-dozen relatives or friends, in the true acceptance of the term; and finally, an enjoyment of the purest description. Yes, indeed, we must lament for those who have never spent one summer day of their lives in dreaming, either socially or solitarily, along the smooth course of some picturesque river—now progressing slowly by the agency of a few listless strokes; now resting on the oar, to gaze into the blue expanse above and trace the strange outlines of its flaky clouds; or, in the welcome shadow of some overhanging tree, to surrender for a moment the active sensation of existence, and sink into a state of half-unconsciousness with the

thoughts at rest, but every feeling keenly sensitive to the charm of the world around. To those true enthusiasts in nature who are not contented with paying careless tribute to its general perfection, but thoroughly familiarise themselves with its individual features, the water appears to be one of the most beautiful, and becomes one of the most beloved; for them it has a nameless fascination, and is recognised as something beyond a mere silent highway or a desirable accessory in landscape-gardening. They understand the affection of the sailor for his peculiar element, notwithstanding its occasional outbreaks; and sympathise in the feeling which induced the eastern sages to select the transparent waters as an emblem of the truth that thinketh no guile. They gaze on its eddying currents, and ask no greater variety than is occasioned by the changing lights and shadows; they look down into its limpid depths and demand no grander field for observation than is afforded by the world of still life beneath; and they desire no greater pleasure than a few hours devoted to communion with its silent beauty and almost mysterious charm.

This one, of the many pleasures provided by the liberal hand of nature to purify and refresh the spirits both of rich and poor, is happily not denied to the inhabitants of our great cities, by whom from force of contrast it would naturally be most warmly appreciated. Few rivers, for example, can afford more pleasant scenes for an excursion than our own old Thames, with the many objects of interest on its banks to beguile the time, and serve as an excuse for the expedition. For those who delight in smooth lawns, noble trees, and botanical wonders of every kind, there are the splendid gardens at Kew; but a little higher up lies Richmond, a world of loveliness implied by its original name of Shene; and Hampton Court, that bourn of excursionists, presents, a few miles onward, its manifold artificial attractions. There are surely sufficient resources within reach to guard against the possibility of a wearisome day in the event, not a very probable one, of the picturesque banks of the river itself presenting insufficient attractions. There are, no doubt, very many persons of all classes who look back to days spent on its bosom as green spots in the track of common life, and will cherish the recollection when more important events have passed from their minds; and very many more, if they hearken to our advice, will seize the first pleasant day that presents itself to store up for themselves equally agreeable reminiscences by imitating the example of the party represented on the preceding page.

As the Pic-nic is usually the result of many an hour's council and cogitation, so the Excursion should always be the inspiration of bright sunshine and buoyant spirits, executed almost on the instant. It should admit, as we have said before, no friends but the dearest, and of these few of us have sufficient number to render the choice embarrassing; none should encumber it who have either fears or finery to be considered, and who cannot summon up at command a little merriment, and a little sentiment—for both will be called into requisition before the day is over. The matter once decided, let them not lose time in seeking conveniences to take with them, for such will assuredly be found but encumbrances in disguise; no, not even though there be ladies in the case, for they will prove at least as independent of creature comforts as any gentleman we ever met with. A sufficiency of the actual necessities for the day will not present a very formidable appearance, and will not be the less appreciated from the absence of the accessories which usually accompany them. Their brief preparations made, our excursionists set forth on their journey, enjoying its result almost as much in anticipation as in reality. Their immediate object is, of course, to leave behind them as speedily as possible London and that portion of the river which is the peculiar sphere of warehouses and penny-boats, and to arrive with the least possible exercise of patience at scenes more congenial to their schemes of amusement. The railroad or steam-boat provides the mean of transit; and at that stage of their journey which may be dictated by the greater or smaller capabilities of the gentlemen for rowing, they quit their more rapid though less romantic conveyance, and become for a time the happy occupants of the first boat they meet with. And now, all obstacles surmounted, and their enterprise sufficiently rewarded, the noise and throng of humanity are exchanged for the splashing sound of the oars in the water, and as much solitude as they can reasonably desire. They have escaped from the oppressive mist of an August day in town, to the refreshing influence of a clear atmosphere and soft breeze; and, more delightful still, the ordinary duties which appertain to the everyday life of each, have yielded for this occasion to the paramount obligation of being happy. The rowers betake themselves to their self-imposed labour with hearty good-will, indifferent, for a time at least, to the fervid rays of the sun; and their companions find food for observation and pleasant converse in many a little passing incident. They gaze on the beautiful villas that so richly adorn the banks of the Thames; now in the proud guise of a stately modern mansion, with its *façade* of stone pillars, and smooth lawn, bounded only by the elms which raise their heads amidst the drooping willows at the water's verge; now in the modest semblance of a thatched cottage (the result, no doubt, of infinitely more care and thought), half veiled with luxuriant ivy, and quite embowered in the circling band of shrubs and trees through which a stolen glance, tempting curiosity, is all that can be obtained. They speculate on the different houses, and people them according to their fancy; not forgetting to envy the inhabitants their privilege of boating as often as they desire, without those preliminary exertions by which they themselves have purchased the pleasure, being rather unconscious how much it has in reality been enhanced thereby. Then a passing steamboat at intervals breaks the stillness with its panting and scuffling, its inharmonious band, and the hum of its gay and noisy freight. It may be doubted if either party envies the other; but our friends have as we see ample reason to be contented with their lot. Time has sped more rapidly than they could have believed possible since their departure from home; the sun is at its meridian; and, willingly or unwillingly, they

are compelled to acknowledge its power, and become sensible of an inclination for rest, shade, and more substantial refreshment. They steer for the left bank of the river, which promises to gratify one of their requirements, and find beneath the drooping branches of a mountain ash a haven as delicious as their imaginations could have demanded at the hand of Nature. The oarsmen now gladly rest from their labours; one occupies himself in raising a large branch, which impedes their complete entrance within the bow; and the other leans back in an attitude of perfect *dolce far niente* enjoyment. He, at least, will experience that passive, dreamy happiness to which we have already alluded as the crowning delight of a boating expedition. The youngest of the party has attained, at last, the object of his ambition, in the possession of an oar; and with, as we should imagine from his countenance, a rather undus idea of his own responsibility, is dabbling harmlessly in the water, under the direction of his next senior in years, who, by virtue of a limited degree of experience, is instructing him in the management of his unwieldy plaything. The two younger of the damsels are inviting the companionship of a pair of the sacred swans of the Thames, which here, as

On St. Mary's lake,
Float double, swan and shadow.

They are, however, of much greater importance than their compeers in general, being under the special protection of the civic authorities. They flutter their snowy plumage, and dip their delicate slender necks in the water as though conscious of deserving the admiration they inspire, and approach the boat with all the confidence of bidden guests, patiently awaiting the *largesse* which former experience has taught them to consider their due; nor will they have long to wait. The meditative maiden in the stern of the boat, "on hospitable thoughts intent," only awaits a steady anchorage to dispense such cheer as is usually to be found on an excursion really impromptu; and which, though not exactly hermit's fare, can boast little that would be deemed luxury by a professed epicure. The good appetites of the party happily dispose them to do full justice to it; nor do they waste any time in idle ceremonies. They linger long, however, in their shady retreat, thinking, as we do, that on a sunny afternoon they can scarcely change their position for a better. The rowers affect continued fatigue, that they may prolong the pleasures of idleness; they listen to the dreamy lay of the "Castle of Indolence," read by a sweet low voice, and think how completely the strain is in harmony with the scene around.

At length the children become impatient for a more stirring scene, and awaken their elders to the duties of common life and the professed object of their expedition. Once more the oars are in requisition, and they are soon landed on the opposite shore at the foot of Richmond-bridge, which was in full view of their resting-place; the boat is committed to the charge of a waterman, with directions that it shall await them a quarter of a mile ahead, and they forthwith proceed to mount the "verdant hill, delightful Shene."

Perhaps a more striking contrast between the two sides of an eminence has seldom presented itself than in the instance of Richmond-hill; on the town side, the ascent is steep, narrow, dusty, and irregular, with little to attract, even of a town life character; we toil on, and on, being forcibly reminded of Bunyan's hill of difficulty, until we reach the summit! No casual glimpse by the way has prepared us for the glorious view which we are to behold; we turn the angle of a brick wall that seemed interminable, and one of the fairest scenes of this or any other land is spread out before us. But who can describe the prospect. It has only wood, water, and green turf to recommend it; but Nature must have been in lavish mood when she fashioned so perfect a whole; no less an authority than Wordsworth himself has proclaimed it the most beautiful piece of pastoral scenery that he had met with, either at home or abroad. There is the wooded park for a background, with its rich foliage extending miles and miles away; the declivity now gentle and gradual, now abrupt and precipitous; the middle distance of meadows, green as the emerald; the winding river with its willowy islands and its picturesque villas, half concealed in a world of greenery; and far, far away the turrets of Windsor Castle are now seen, now lost, in the distance. Who that beholds all this for the first time does not feel his utter inability to express in words the feeling of intense admiration which it inspires, for there is a subduing influence in beauty of every kind. By-and-by the tongue is loosed, fresh points of view and fresh prospects are discovered, and each is declared more lovely than its predecessor. Having beheld the scene from every other point of sight, it only remains to view it from the extreme end of the rugged pathway which incloses the park. It is true the river is there hardly visible, but the uplands and lowlands of foliage, with the clear blue sky above them, offer no unworthy idea of Vallombrosa, for no sign of the habitation of man presents itself to break the charm of the woody landscape. Often and long do they linger, until the declining sun warns them that even a summer day must come to an end. In the programme of their expedition had been included a visit to Twickenham, and a glance at the garden that once belonged to Pope, as well as at the "painted barn" of Horace Walpole; but to surrender the golden glory of the setting sun during their homeward voyage would, indeed, be too great a sacrifice to pay; the haunts of the poet and the worldly philosopher must, on this occasion remain unvisited, but will serve as a welcome shrine for a future pilgrimage. And thus the day comes to an end, having proved fertile in enjoyment, not the less real from the simplicity of its elements; the wanderers have met with no stirring adventure, surmounted no romantic difficulty, and seen no sight but the face of nature; that, however, they have sought in a worthy and earnest spirit, and have had their reward.