

AUGUST.—CLOSE OF THE SEASON.



WHENEVER we are disposed to call up a picture of solitude and desolation, we are apt to speak of the deserts of Arabia, the Cities of the Plain, the ruins of Tadmor, or some other far away scene of proverbial loneliness, where the hand of time or of man has passed roughly over the scene—sparing, however, some few features, calculated to afford a perpetual proverb for the warning or wonder of mankind. But, however emphatic illustrations like these might appear to the majority of minds, there might be found not a few who would fail to recognise in these time-honoured scenes the most perfect types of desolation. They would point rather to more familiar localities, as presenting, under certain circumstances, features far more suggestive of despondency than any that could be found elsewhere.

Many genuine *habitués* and lovers of London there are, whose eyes first opened on its cloudy skies, who made their first acquaintance with nature in its squares and parks, with affections and interests unaccustomed to wander far afield, who would be of this opinion. A youth passed in the shades of old Westminster, or the venerable Charter-house, will prove not infrequently but the stately passage to the learned Inns of Court, or the unlettered courts of the Royal Exchange. What marvel, then, if, where fame and fortune are most ardently struggled for, and may, perchance, have been won, that the deepest sympathies should take root and flourish? London becomes, in its widest sense, a nursing mother to thousands, who for ten good months in the year demand no fairer scene than that which habitually surrounds them. But should any unusual conjuncture of circumstances deprive them of their ordinary furlough at the close of the Season, neither Tadmor of the Desert, nor the Valley of Desolation itself, would afford a realisation of loneliness half so complete as their own Queen of Cities, beheld in the unaccustomed months of August and September.

None but an habitual resident in the Great City can be fully alive to the wide distinctions of appearance which it presents in the months of May and September. Glance at it on a bright, genial, life-breathing Spring day. Go into the City itself (for we need not limit our observations to the Court end, although there the features of the Season are most clearly perceptible); join the stream of life in its bustling thoroughfares, adventure into its intricate recesses, thread its tortuous streets, penetrate even into its *culs-de-sac*, and there, even there, you shall discover evidence that the crowning month of Spring has arrived.

Faint attempts at garnish and decoration to do "honour to the May" are perceptible even in the crowded haunts of traffic; the painter and whitewasher have done their best to throw lightness and brightness over the surface of things even among the warehouses; whilst the swarming marts display not only their richest stores, but a visible effort to exhibit them in their fairest aspect. A plenitude of good fare abounds on every side; indeed, we might almost fancy, from external symptoms, that gardens and hothouses lurked in the immediate neighbourhoods, and that the sea itself was no further distant than the Thames.

Turn your steps westward, and it will seem as though the great family of mankind were keeping holiday. Carriages are dashing hither and thither, bearing their burthens of elegant idlers on their various time-killing missions, and the causeway is thronged with animated pedestrians. The shops are teeming with customers—the shopmen overflowing with good-humour. The dark months of the year, which seemed so unproductive of everything but ennuï, were the seed-time of its richest manufactures; and the spring-time of nature now rejoices over this abundant harvest of the industrial arts.

How earnestly have artist and artisan—illustrious and obscure—been toiling to furnish amusement for the busy idler. Is he a lover of the fine arts—one who appreciates the genius of bygone ages?—the "old masters" are at hand to feed his enthusiasm. If his taste be independent and individual, he will find at the Academy, in the works of his contemporaries, an ample field for the

exercise of his criticism. If he be a votary of St. Cecilia, and a musician of the old school, performances of ancient music refresh his classic taste; if of the new, *matinées* and *soirées musicales* hourly increase his astonishment and admiration of its strange vagaries and achievements. Again, if he be scientific, institutions, royal and otherwise, open their arms to receive him; if philanthropic, numberless benevolent societies claim him as a martyr. He cannot even walk the streets without receiving courteous invitations to witness something new and strange (at a small pecuniary outlay, be it understood). He need not travel to the Antipodes to become personally acquainted with the appearance and habits of its children. Without chart or compass, he may join the toiling multitudes at the Gold Fields; may sun himself in the Garden of the World at Mexico; cool himself again on the summit of Mont Blanc; and, finally, when weary of the wild and wonderful, he has only to turn into the nearest park or garden to be at home with all that is freshest and fairest in the nature, animate and inanimate, of his own favoured country. Pass but a few short weeks of mornings and evenings of festivity and then—

A change comes o'er the spirit of his dream.

That the swallows of society should have taken flight with the season that brought them, is not wonderful, but where are the native inhabitants of the Great City? They too, have departed with their gay visitants. Even the toiling multitude has for the most part succeeded in slipping or lengthening its chain. None remain but a few human zoophytes who can exist only where nature has planted them; and the unwilling and melancholy captives of circumstance and necessity. It is a fact so well known, as almost to become proverbial, that an Englishman has one important advantage over the native of any other clime, inasmuch as whatever misfortune befall him, he can always solace himself with a national grumble! It cannot be denied that, when he is overtaken by the particular misery in question, that of finding himself a prisoner in London, during the months of August and September, this notable specific is largely indulged in; nor does this always prove his only elixir, for a quiet fit of the sullen is apt to supervene, before he is entirely restored to his usual state of calm careless equanimity. His philosophy has probably been taxed rather severely; for having no prospective engagements of his own, he has of course been invited to sympathise with the pleasant anticipations of all his friends. He has been called upon to map out four after four, embodying the largest amount of pleasure and number of miles, to be derived from a given amount of time and money. As a reward for his trouble, he has probably been entrusted with a host of commissions, reserving each other only in being of the most unenviable description; and the execution of which (to make things more pleasant) is evidently regarded by his friends, as a salutary and acceptable occupation—for which in his desolate wearisome position he should be duly thankful. Then from pure charity, he had been induced to turn his dining-room into a kind of caravansera for the benefit of such bachelor intimates as had broken up their old quarters, but who had not yet taken themselves to new ones; and, finally, on their departure, to constitute his rooms into a kind of amateur pantechicon, for the safe keeping of the special favourites, and not infrequently of all the properties they leave behind them.

At length the last straggler has departed, and he must face London alone. A few days are devoted to solitary musings; but even the pleasures of sulkiness, so fondly dwelt upon by Charles Lamb, are soon exhausted. Compelled, like an unquiet spirit, to haunt the scenes most familiar to his breathing existence, he adventures into the streets to find the West-end in mourning, and the East-end in stagnant disorder. The houses in his accustomed "beat" present as mournful an appearance as though the plague had waded its dark wing over them. Blinds are papered up, shutters are closed, though the windows themselves have become opaque from want of cleaning. All is vacant and still, where of yore the well-fed porter lounged in his capacious chair, awaiting the thundering knock, and the well-dressed "gentleman" pressed obsequiously forward to announce the welcome advent. Were he rash enough to penetrate into that well-known vestibule—

His echoes and its empty tread
Would sound like voices from the dead.

As our friend passes by, a Cerberus, with a key in one hand and a bunch of turnips in the other, looks up from the lower regions, and—despite his lounging gait, mistaking him for an ambulatory vendor of stationery—calls out that nothing is wanted, and retreats again to her den.

With something very like an anæsthesia on his lips, he quickens his pace, and is jostled by a porter laden with grouse, forcibly reminding him of woods and moorlands far away. He is lost in a vision of sylvan glades, purple heather, wild thyme, and bracken; and though he may seem to gaze, sees nothing until he finds himself in the wilderness of Hyde-park. He looks around on what was once bright green sward, peopled with well-dressed pleasure-takers, and groups of fair children, and sees in the distance two or three earnest pedestrians bent on making their way from Rutland Gate to the Marble Arch. In the dusty drive, lately so cool and well watered, a few drowsy-looking carriages creep slowly along, bearing their antiquated freights of ailing dowagers intent on taking the due amount of exercise and draughts of fresh air prescribed by the favourite physician, the daily sight of whose sympathising face they would not exchange for the very best phase of nature. But what has become of those brilliant equipages, teeming with life and such beauty as England only can exhibit? and where is that gallant cavalcade of dashing equestrians that gave spirit and interest to Rotten Row? The scenes remain, but the busy actors have vanished. The trees beside the Serpentine look gloomy and thirsty; its waters, seen through the hazy atmosphere, appear dark and turbid; its shores are tenantless; and, but for the absence of a Charon, thinks our wanderer, one might fancy oneself standing on the very banks of the Styx! He finds no temptation to linger, and wends his way into the suburb of Knightsbridge, wholly uncertain as to his subsequent course. To exhibit himself even to the waiters at his club, is not to be thought of; to dine in his chambers might prove unsatisfactory to his housekeeper and her coadjutor, already on the verge of rebellion at his unseasonable presence in Town; it is a matter of indifference to him where he eats his dinner, but two or three hours must be disposed of in some way. As he walks musingly onwards he becomes encompassed by street vagabonds of every kind. Inspired at the unexpected sight of a gentlemanly idler, they pursue him with unwearied energy, thrusting in his face pin-cushions, dolls, pocket-books, knives with blades sticking out in every direction; in fact, everything that at this particular time, or any other, would be most inconvenient for him to possess; whilst, no less skilled in tormenting, a host of ragged children running beside him, treading on his toes at every step, and scraping his hands with oyster-shells, keep up a piteous whine of—"Please remember the grotto, sir; 'tis only once a year!" "Hammersmith, Brentford, Kew, Richmond!" shout two rival omnibus cads in his ear, as they almost fight for the possession of the victim; he has not much energy for resistance; and this is at any rate one mode of escape from knives and oysters. So he mounts the box of the nearest conveyance, lights a cigar, and putting an end to Jehu's proffered civilities, gives himself up to reflections on the mutability of all things.