

## JULY.—VILLAGE LIFE.



DELIGHTFUL as it undoubtedly is, towards the close of a London summer to think of nature in her matured beauty as an attainable blessing, there are, perhaps, but few responsible heads of families having made the tour of convenient watering-places, and knowing the outskirts of the Continent by heart, who would not, but for "the children," and "the usages of society," prefer remaining quietly at home in the dull season, to deciding the oft-repeated question of "where shall we go." So many conflicting advantages are desired that the "happy valley" of Rasselas itself could scarcely have combined them. "The air should be bracing on Fanny's account," suggests one parent; "but Charlie cannot bear a cold atmosphere," responds the other: so a happy medium in this respect is indispensable. The situation must be accessible on account of the gentleman, whose business ties are only partially relaxed. Not too accessible, however, resolves the lady—we go out of town for our own benefit, not for that of our acquaintances. Then, without touching on other requirements, the Paradise must have a good family house to let, on terms unprecedentedly low.

All these difficulties it had been my lot to encounter year after year; and at the end of one particular July I had made up my mind that for this season we must be contented with such measure of rurality as could be secured by an occasional trip to Richmond, and an habitual recourse to the convenient privileges of Kensington Gardens and our own square. But circumstances enabled me to reserve this expedient against some period of more urgent need. The head of the family was summoned abroad on a business mission, which, though likely to be of some duration, presented neither excuse nor attraction for a pleasure trip on my part. The children chanced to be invited about the same time to make the acquaintance of some Yorkshire consins; and thus I was left desolate and almost homeless; for the servants were on board wages, the painters had taken possession, and I was evidently regarded as an intruder in my own house. At this juncture I called to mind an invitation given me years before by a maiden lady, a cousin of my mother's, living in a secluded country village in the west of England. This seemed the very moment to avail myself of it, for the delightful freedom of village life presented strong attractions to my imagination. So, after giving a three days' notice, I packed up my wardrobe, and started by the Great Western Railroad.

On a short branch line to which I was in due time transferred, stands a quiet little Gothic station, called Ashmore. This was my place of destination; and when the train had scuffled off, I found myself on the little platform; listening, if the expression be admissible, to the intense silence around. The inquiry of a rustic youth, whether I was the lady for Miss Drysdale's, and the information that he had brought a barrow to take my luggage, comfortably assured me that I was an expected guest; and I started full of pleasant anticipations to traverse the two miles of green lane which lay between the station and the village from which it rather disingenuously took its name. As I had paid several visits there in my juvenile days, the sudden turn which presented certain of its features to my view revealed no unfamiliar scene. There was the triangular green, with the linen laid out to bleach as usual; the little pond with its white railing, and flock of goslings—lineal descendants, no doubt, of those I remembered there fifteen years before. There was the "great house," belonging to the Lord of the Manor, enclosed within its massive iron gates. I could just see the facade of ornamented red brick and the innumerable long narrow casements, gleaming through the thick layers of the cedar branches. So far, Ashmore was unaltered; but, on advancing towards the more frequented regions, I noticed several innovations, to which I could at first scarcely reconcile myself. A small row of staring white houses had sprung up from the enterprise and capital of some village builder. The old barn-like school-house, which had been the *alma mater* of half the village, had given place to a smart Gothic building, bearing the arms of the Ashmores—from which noble house the village derived its name. As some consolation for me, however, there remained many of the antiquated thatched cottages, half buried in the luxuriant vegetation of their little garden-plots; the common pump occupied its wonted position; and the blacksmith and his forge looked as busy and as picturesque as ever. These various observations had tempted me to loiter unconsciously; but, as I happened to glance onward at the square grey tower of the church which faced the village, and seemed to be keeping watch and ward over the morals of its inhabitants, a gleam of sunshine lighted up the golden letters of the clock, and drew my attention to the serious fact that the hands were at seven—an hour later than the Ashmore tea-time, which I remembered to have been, as the laws of the Medes and Persians, unalterable. I hurried up to the range of white frontage, which my cousin and the medical man divided between them, and reached it just as the former, warned of my approach, had issued forth to meet and welcome me.

—Having resigned my travelling gear into the care of a neat-handed Phyllis in attendance, I was ushered into the little bay-windowed dining-room, where the tea equipage, arranged on a table exhibiting the utmost polish of which mahogany is susceptible, presented no small attractions to a hungry and weary traveller. The evening's hours sped away pleasantly enough in the interchange of news and reminiscences of former days; so much so, indeed, that when the bed-room candlesticks made their appearance at the first stroke of ten, we both expressed our regret, and I boldly suggested, whether, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, half an hour's grace might not be permitted. As there seemed some difficulty about the matter, I did not press my request, but was forthwith conducted in state to my apartment. Although it was a warm evening in July, I shivered involuntarily as I entered; for it was soon evident that the dismal honour of the best bed-room had been bestowed upon me. There was the unmistakable carved four-post bedstead, with its crimson morcen furniture and ostentations green and white checked watch-pockets; and that snowy mountain of a bed, sloped and rounded with such marvellous precision, that one felt it ought not to be lightly invaded. There was the magnificent painted chimney-board, which shut out all suspicion of air in summer, and dissipated in winter any visions of a fire to which the polished fire-irons might have given rise in inconsiderate minds. The chimney-piece bore its habitual burden of everlasting flowers and feather-grass at either end, and small shells, arranged with mathematical precision, to form connecting links with the china teapot in the centre; while, from above, the worthy Dr. Drysdale, in the act of writing a prescription, looks down approvingly on them and me. There was scarcely an ornament of an article of useful furniture in the room—from the lofty chest of double drawers, with their brass handles, down to the small selection of the old divines, suspended on shelves against the wall—which did not look like the ghost of a departed age. In due time I managed to compose myself to rest; but the sense of my position scarcely deserted me throughout the night.

After breakfast, on the following morning, I expressed a desire to unpack my boxes, of which, for some mysterious reason, I had not been allowed to have full possession on the preceding evening. My cousin hesitated, and finally requested me, with some embarrassment, "to adjourn," if I did not mind, to the convenient laundry across the yard, for the purpose of opening my wardrobe, as it could then be purified from all London associations before its admission into the "best bed-room." I meekly ventured a few words in defence of London generally, and my property individually, and then adjourned to the regions where the malign articles were performing quarantine. Much against my will the whole household was assembled to assist; the process was happily brought to a conclusion before dinner-time. I knew that it was the custom of my hostess to repose for a couple of hours after her midday meal, and, therefore, announced my intention of taking a stroll down the village, and renewing my acquaintance with the pretty churchyard, while she did so. But I was met with so pathetic an inquiry what the neighbours would think of her if she suffered me to walk out alone, and so earnest an exhortation to follow her example, that I obediently extended myself on a companion sofa, in a state of hopeless watchfulness, and occupied myself with a leisurely revision of my former views on the freedom of village life.

In due time I was released from duress, and we seated ourselves in state at the drawing-room window, for the combined purposes of observation, needle-work, and social converse. After a few general remarks, Miss Drysdale, with an air of considerable gravity, requested my advice on a subject of importance, which, she said, had been pressing heavily upon her mind for many days. Jane, the pretty housemaid, who, as I might have noticed, carried personal neatness to an almost unnecessary extent, had been seen to emerge for three successive Sunday afternoons in the double glories of a parasol and veil. She, herself, she continued, did not approve of either, in reference to the lower classes; but, having no wish to be severe, would be glad if, as the mistress of a family, I would tell her which might be retained with least injury to the character of the establishment. After many pros and cons, it was agreed that a brown parasol, of useful size, but without fringe, might be conceded for Jane's comfort; and this matter settled, we proceeded to our tea, with the conviction that its enjoyment had been fairly and honestly earned. The evening terminated in a walk to the nearest town, and the selection of a new cap, which, in conjunction with Miss Drysdale's best maroon setin, was intended to do honour to any little festivities which might be instituted on my account.

My first day at Ashmore did not close, without some slight misgivings as to my own fitness for the enjoyment of village life and the justice of my views as to liberty; but, in despite of these doubts, some pleasures were in store for me. I had acquaintanceships of former days to renew, and old remembered landmarks to revisit, which revived many an association and memory as brightly in my mind as though they had been but of yesterday. It must not be supposed, however, that on memory alone I was dependent for entertainment. To say nothing of four select tea-drinkings, organized entirely in my honour, we were present at the school festival held in the clergyman's paddock, and at the annual entertainment, given by an amiable middle-aged bachelor in his summer-house, as a compliment to the ladies of the village.

Of course some intervals occurred during which we were thrown upon our own resources, but even then fortune continued to favour me. Preserving time made its appearance, and the business connected with it was extended, by proper management, over four mornings, giving great animation to the household. Then we received two new volumes from the local book society, consisting of a religious novel and travels in the East; which we read aloud alternately at the rate of five pages a day. There was a temperance meeting, too, held in the school house, which we attended, in common with the rest of the neighbourhood. The excitement of feeling it created was so great, that lecturer, committee, and audience afterwards adjourned to the village pump, to bestow the appropriate tribute of a crown of flowers on the emblem of total abstinence. Occasionally, when in want of a decided change, we walked over to the little post town and improvised a commission at the linen-draper's with the view of inspecting his novelties. It is true the same rolls of Welsh flannel, the same squirrel victrines, and print dresses always greeted our eyes, but at any rate we had tasted the pleasures of hope on our way thither.

Notwithstanding these varied amusements, I must confess that before the expiration of the month fixed as the period of my stay, I had begun to feel a little weary of this life in miniature, indifferent to the trifling interests around me, and impatient of the small miseries so frequently presented for sympathy. Under these circumstances I resolved to run no risk of tarnishing my character, and wearing out my welcome by a longer stay. The solitary officer at the station saw me once more, and I took my departure from Ashmore, amidst the hospitable regrets of my good cousin. I knew, however, that she would soon have the cares of the washing day to divert her mind (for I must own I had meanly timed my departure, with a view to escape that family epoch); and therefore had no drawback to the satisfaction I felt, at finding myself once more at home—free to come and go, to dine at strange hours or not to dine at all, if I preferred it; in short, to follow the inclination of the moment, unrestrained by the barrier which had so perpetually encircled me at Ashmore, of "what people would think of it."