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<ARCADIA.>

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Perhaps the largest amount of simple pleasure possible to adult life

is to be found in the first weeks of the summer's holiday, when the

hard-worked man of business leaves his office and all its anxieties

behind him, and goes off to the sea-side or the hills for a couple of

months' relaxation. Everything is so fresh to him, it is like the

renewal of his boyhood; and if he happens to have chosen a picturesque

place, where the houses stand well and make that ornate kind of

landscape to be found in show-places, he wonders how it is that people

who can stay here ever leave, or tire of the beauties that are so

delightful to him. Yet he hears of this comfortable mansion, with its

park and well-appointed grounds, waiting for an occupant; he is told

of that fairyland cottage, embowered in roses and jessamine, with a

garden gay and redolent with flowers, to be had for a mere song; and

he finds to his surprise that the owners of these choice corners of

Arcadia are only anxious to escape from what he would, if he could, be

only anxious to retain.

In his first days this restlessness, this discontent, is simply

inconceivable. What more do they want than what they have? Why, that

field lying there in the sunshine, dotted about with dun-coloured cows

which glow like glorified Cuyps in the evening red, and backed by rock

and tree and tumbling cascade, would be enough to make him happy. He

could never weary of such a lovely bit of home scenery; and if to this

he adds a view of the sea, or the crags and purple shadows of a

mountain, he has wherewith to make him blessed for the remainder of

his life. So he thinks while the smoke of London and the sulphur of

the Metropolitan still cling about his throat, and the roar of the

streets has not quite died out of his ears.

The woods are full of flowers and the rarer kind of insects, and he is

never sated with the sea. There is the trout stream as clear as

crystal, where he is sure of a rise if he waits long enough; the

moors, where he may shoot if he can put up a bird to shoot at, are

handy; and there is no end to the picturesque bits just made for his

sketch-book. Whatever his tastes may make him ~~ naturalist, sailor,

sportsman, artist ~~ he has ample scope for their exercise; and ten or

eleven months' disuse gives him a greater zest now that his playtime

has come round again. At every turn he falls upon little scenes which

give him an odd pleasure, as if they belonged to another life ~~ things

he has seen in old paintings, or read of in quaint books, long ago.

Here go by two countrywomen, whose red and purple dresses are touched

by the sun with startling effect, as they wind up the grey hillside

road; there clatters past on horseback a group of market-girls with

flapping straw hats, and carrying their baskets on their arms as if

they were a set of Gainsborough's models come back to life, who turn

their dark eyes and fresh comely faces to the London man with frank

curiosity as they canter on and smother him with dust. Now he passes

through the midst of a village fair, where youths are dancing in a

barn to the sound of a cracked fiddle, and where, standing under an

ivied porch, a pretty young woman unconsciously makes a picture as she

bends down to fill a little child's held-up pinafore with sweets and

cakes. The idyl here is so complete that the contemplation of pence

given for the accommodation of the barn, or the calculation of

shillings to be spent in beer afterwards, or the likelihood that the

little one had brought a halfpenny in its chubby fist for the good

things its small soul coveted, does not enter his mind.

The idea of base pelf in a scene so pure and innocent would be a kind

of high treason to the poetic instinct; so the London man

instinctively feels, glad to recognize the ideal he is mainly

responsible for making. How can it be otherwise? A heron is fishing in

the river; a kingfisher flashes past; swallows skim the ground or dart

slanting above his head; white-sailed boats glide close inshore; a

dragon-fly suns itself on a tall plumed thistle; young birds rustle in

and out of the foliage; distant cattle low; cottage children laugh;

everywhere he finds quiet, peace, absolute social repose, the absence

of disturbing passions; and it seems to him that all who live here

must feel the same delightful influences as those which he is feeling

now, and be as innocent and virtuous as the place is beautiful and

quiet.

But the charm does not last. Very few of us retain to the end of our

holidays the same enthusiastic delight in our Arcadia that we had in

the beginning. Constant change of Arcadias keeps up the illusion

better; and with it the excitement; but a long spell in one place,

however beautiful ~~ unless indeed, it lasts so long that one becomes

personally fond of the place and interested in the people ~~ is almost

sure to end in weariness. At first the modern pilgrim is savagely

disinclined to society and his kind. All the signs and circumstances

of the life he has left behind him are distasteful. He likes to watch

the fishing-boats, but he abhors the steamers which put into his

little harbour, and the excursionists who come by them he accounts as

heathens and accursed. Trains, like steamers, are signs of a reprobate

generation and made only for evildoers. He has no reverence for the

post, and his soul is not rejoiced at the sight of letters. Even his

daily paper is left unopened, and no change of Ministry counts as

equal in importance with the picturesque bits he wishes to sketch, or

the rare ferns and beetles to be found by long rambles and much

diligence. By degrees the novelty wears off. His soul yearns after

the life he has left, and he begins to look for the signs thereof with

interest, not to say pleasure. He watches the arrival of the boat, or

he strolls up to the railway station and speculates on the new comers

with benevolence. If he sees a casual acquaintance, he hails him with

enthusiastic cordiality; and in his extremity is reduced to fraternize

with men 'not in his way.' He becomes peevish at the lateness of the

mail, and he reads his <hi> Times </hi> from beginning to end, taking in even the agony column and the advertisements. He finds his idyllic pictures

to be pictures, and nothing more. His Arcadians are no better than

their neighbours; and, as for the absence of human passions ~~ they are

merely dwarfed to the dimensions of the life, and are as relatively

strong here as elsewhere. The inhabitants of those flowery cottages

quarrel among each other for trifles which he would have thought only

children could have noticed; and they gossip to an extent of which he

in his larger metropolitan life has no experience.

If he stays a few weeks longer than is the custom of visitors, he is

as much an object of curiosity and surmise as if he were a man of

another hemisphere; and he may think himself fortunate if vague

reports do not get afloat touching his honesty, his morality, or his

sanity. Nine times out of ten, if a personage at home, he is nobody

here. He may be sure that, however great his name in art and

literature, it will not be accounted to him for honour ~~ it will only

place him next to a well-conditioned mountebank; political fame,

patent to all the world, rank which <reg orig=”no one”> no-one </reg> can mistake, and money which all may handle, alone going down in remote country places and carrying esteem along with them. If a wise man, he will forgive the uncharitable surmises and the contempt of which he is the object,

knowing the ignorance of life as well as the purposeless vacuity from

which they spring; but they are not the less unpleasant, and to

understand a cause is not therefore to rejoice in the effect.

As time goes on, he finds Arcadian poverty of circumstance gradually

becoming unbearable. He misses the familiar conveniences and orderly

arrangements of his London life. He has a raging tooth, and there is

no dentist for miles round; he falls sick, or sprains his ankle, and

the only doctor at hand is a half tipsy vet., or perhaps an old woman

skilled in herbs, or a bone-setter with a local reputation. His

letters go astray among the various hands to which they are entrusted;

his paper is irregular; <hi> Punch </hi> and his illustrated weeklies come a day late, with torn covers and greasy thumbmarks testifying to the

love of pictorial art which encountered them by the way. He finds that

he wants the excitement of professional life and the changeful action

of current history. He feels shunted here, out of the world, in a

corner, set aside, lost. The rest is still delicious; but he misses

the centralized interest of metropolitan life, and catches himself

hankering after the old intellectual fleshpots with the fervour of an

exile, counting the days of his further stay.

And then at last this rest, which has been so sweet, becomes monotony,

and palls on him. One trout is very like another trout, barring a few

ounces of weight. When he has expatiated on his first find of

moon-fern, and dug it up carefully by the roots for his own fernery at

Bayswater, he is slightly disgusted to come upon many tufts of

moon-fern, and to know that it is not so very rare hereabouts after

all, and that he cannot take away half he sees. Then too, he begins to

understand the true meaning of the pictures, Gainsborough and others,

which were so quaintly beautiful to him in the early days. The idyllic

youths dancing in the beerhouse barn are clumsy louts who are kept

from the commission of great offences mainly because they have no

opportunity for dramatic sins; but they indemnify themselves by petty

agricultural pilferings, and they get boozy on small beer. The pretty

market-girls cantering by, are much like other daughters of Eve

elsewhere, save that they have more familiarity with certain facts of

natural life than good girls in town possess, and are a trifle more

easy to dupe. On the whole, he finds human nature much the same in

essentials here as in London ~~ Arcadia being the poorer of the two,

inasmuch as it wants the sharpness, the deftness, the refinement of

bearing given by much intercourse and the more intimate contact of

classes.

By the time his holidays are over, our London man goes back to his

work invigorated in body, but quite sufficiently sated in mind to

return with pleasure to his old pursuits. He walks into the office

decidedly stouter than when he left, much sunburnt, and unfeignedly

glad to see them all again. It pleases him to feel like MacGregor on

his native heath once more; though his native heath is only a dingy

office in the E.C. district, with a view of his rival's chimney-pots.

Still it is pleasant; and to know that he is recognized as Mr.

So-and-So of the City, a safe man and with a character to lose, is

more gratifying to his pride than to have his quality and standing

discussed in village back-parlours and tap-rooms, and the question

whether he is a man whom Arcadia may trust, gravely debated by boors

whose pence are not as his pounds. He speaks with rapture of his

delightful holiday, and extols the virtues of Arcadia and the

Arcadians as warmly as if he believed in them. Perhaps he grumbles

ostentatiously at his return to harness; but in his heart he knows it

to be the better life; for, delicious as it is to sit in the sun

eating lotuses, it is nobler to weed out tares and to plant corn.

The peace to which we are all looking is not to be had in a Highland

glen nor a Devonshire lane; and beautiful as are the retreats

and show-places to which men of business rush for rest and

refreshment ~~ peaceful as they are to look at, and happy as it seems to

us their inhabitants must be ~~ it is all only a matter of the eye. They

are Arcadias, if one likes to call them so; but while a man's powers

remain to him they are halting-places only, not homes; and he who

would make them his home before his legitimate time, would come to a

weariness which should cause him to regret bitterly and often the

collar which had once so galled him, and the work at the hardness of

which he had so often growled.