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"Country Pleasures" by Miss Sedgwick

Mr. Astley, a gentleman residing in New York, --whether last year, or twenty years ago, I am not bound to tell,--had one child, Lucy, a little girl ten years old. Mr. Astley had been very unfortunate in the loss of an only son; and one year after that event, the death of Lucy's mother had bereft him of all that was very near or dear to him, excepting this child, in whom his affections were now fearfully concentrated. Lucy's health, too, had suffered from the diseases incident to childhood, and perhaps from anxious tenderness of her father, the zeal of her physician, and the watching of her nurses. She looked like a delicate flower that the first rude blast must sweep from its parent-stem. The loss of her little playfellow had affected her spirits. She missed her mother too, every hour in the day; and though it is not common for children to look back on the past, poor Lucy could not help it. Every desire and feeling that rose in her bosom reminded her of her mother; for to her she had gone to tell every want, every joy, and every sorrow.

The nursery, where her mother always sat ready to join in the sports of her children, to assist their studies, or settle their little disputes, seemed now like a tomb to poor Lucy; and though it was filled with books and toys of every description, Lucy would sit there without the power of occupying or amusing herself. "Do take a book, Lucy," said her kind nurse, Mary: "Here is this beautiful Arabian Nights, with the large pictures." "There is no pleasure in reading it now," replied Lucy. "I can't go to mamma to explain it." "Well then, Lucy, take these nice painted bricks, and build you a castle." Lucy complied, for she hated to be sulky; and when it was done, she burst into tears, saying, "Oh, poor Willie! if he were only here to toss it over, and build another." The nurse gently put away the bricks, drew out the table, and placed on it some paper, brushes, and a paint-box that had been bought for Lucy's amusement; for she had not yet taken lessons in drawing. Lucy attempted a bunch of flowers, but soon pushed away the paper, saying she could do nothing now.

The nursery was shut up, and another apartment of the large house fitted up for Lucy and her nurse; but still her health and spirits did not return. Her father was advised to send her into the country for the summer; but his business kept him in the city, and he had not resolution to part with her. He hoped that short excursions would revive her. He took her often to Rockaway, and Staten Island, and sent her almost every afternoon to the beautiful walks of Hoboken. Still poor Lucy remained pale and spiritless. At last, the physician advised Mr. Astley so earnestly to send her for two or three months into the country, that he became alarmed, and consented. She was sent to her aunt Ames, in Massachusetts.

I am obliged to tell my young readers some particulars that I had rather not communicate; but it is perhaps best they should know what a mixed material human character is. Generosity is sometimes found with much selfishness; and a person who has lived a long while without manifesting it may, if addressed in the right way, or by the right person, be found capable of this noble quality. Though Lucy's father was by no means an avaricious man, he set a high value on his wealth. He lived in expensive style, and gave on all common occasions of giving; but the truth that he was merely God's steward, and bound to apply the fortune in his hands to the best uses for others, as well as himself, seemed not to have occurred to him.

When his son died, he felt more than ever the insecurity of every earthly possession, and endeavoured to secure his property from the mischances that might befall it. Might it not have been the design of Heaven in removing his only son, that he should open his heart and his doors to the unportioned children of others?

We must go back a few months in our story. Lucy's aunt Ames was the only sister of her mother. Both sisters were born to fortune and delicately bred. Mrs. Ames' husband was a man of

integrity and wit—a man of the soundest judgement I have ever known, in other people's affairs; his own he fatally mismanaged; and finally, when but a remnant of their property remained, he sent his wife and boys to live on a farm in Massachusetts, while he went forth full of admirable plans and plausible projects to seek his fortune. Mrs. Ames suffered the changes in her condition without repining. If she had ceased to hope for much, she desired little, and seemed to regret nothing but that she had not the means to educate her boys. Liston, the eldest, was obliged to work on the farm. He had early shown a talent for painting. When he was but four years old, he drew on his slate his father's dog, Argus, (the dog then twice the size of the artist,) saying as he did so, "Ah! Argy, I can do it all but the wagging of your tail."

As he grew older, his passion for the art increased to such a degree that he had little interest in any other study or pursuit. His tasks done,--he did them, for he was a most dutiful child,--he was sketching his mother, his brothers, his dog, his cat, the mountains, the trees, the clouds, the fences, the old well, the broken horse-block; nothing was too high or too humble for Liston's pencil. "The best thing you could do with that boy, Mrs. Ames," said a friend, who had been looking over Liston's drawings, "is to send him to live with his uncle Astley, to be bred to the profession of painting." Mrs. Ames, whatever she thought, merely replied, "I could not ask such a favour of Mr. Astley." "Nothing ask, nothing have," said her adviser; and the conversation was dropped.

Was it not strange that Mr. Astley did not endeavor to supply society to his daughter by taking into his family one of her cousins? I have often wondered at seeing persons who had large and half-fulfilled houses, neglect those charitable hospitalities that would cost them so little, and do so much good to others. We have much to wonder at in this world of ours, with the evil that is done, and the good that is not done! After much hesitation, and much anxiety, lest Mr. Astley might think she meant indirectly to ask his aid, Mrs. Ames addressed a letter to him, stating Liston's decided taste and talent for painting; and requesting Mr. Astley to show some specimens which she enclosed to a judicious artist, and if they should be approved, to tell her if he knew any mode by which Liston could support himself while he was acquiring the art.

In a few days, she received the following reply:--

"My dear Sister,

"I send you back the specimens, which you will perceive I have not opened, as I feared I would not be able to do them up so neatly again, and I have no curiosity in such matters.

"I did not think it worth while to trouble an artist to look at them, as I am decidedly against Liston entering on the business. It is a beggarly profession to all but those who are at the head of it; which he would have a slender chance of being. I advise you by all means to enter him in the mercantile line. A country store is as good a place as can be for beginning. Remember me to Liston and your other boys. As the nephews of my dear and lamented wife, their welfare will always interest me. I enclose \$20, which you will do me the favour to use for them; and believe me.

"Your affectionate brother, R. Astley."

Had Mrs. Ames been a proud, or an impetuous woman, she might have thrown the letter and the bank-note into the fire; but she was gentle, reasonable, and thoroughly disciplined; and after the first sharp pang of disappointment had subsided, she said, "It is possible that Mr. Astley judges better than I do. I ought not to have expected he would enter into our views. At any rate, poor Liston shall not have the mortification of knowing that his sketches were never looked at;" and she carefully locked them in her desk.

It was not long after this that Mr. Astley wrote to request she would receive Lucy and her nurse for a few weeks. She answered him that nothing could gratify her so much as to have Lucy with her; but she strongly advised against the nurse being sent, as she thought an entire change of life would be best for her niece.

Mr. Astley perceived the good sense of this suggestion; and accordingly the nurse was ordered, after leaving Lucy with her aunt, to return immediately to New-York.

It was a bitter parting. The kind nurse doated on Lucy, and Lucy thought she must be miserable without her, who had supplied all her wants, even to the brushing of her hair, and tying up her shoe-strings. "Oh dear, Mary," said she, "what shall I do without you? who will dress me in the morning, and fix me for dinner? and put me to bed? Do tell aunt I can't go to sleep without a light in my room; and do not ask her, as father told you, to have a fire made for me to dress by, of damp mornings; and do tell her I am afraid of dogs, and horribly afraid of cats;--oh, Mary, what shall I do!"

The nurse soothed and promised; but poor Lucy was left with the conviction that she must be miserable till she saw her again. It so happened, that just at the time of Lucy's visit, Mrs. Ames' sons were all absent from home, excepting Liston; who was usually employed on the farm during the day; and of course Lucy was left very much alone with her aunt. On the day of the nurse's departure, Mrs. Ames in vain tried to interest the poor girl. Her aunt proposed a walk. Walking, Lucy said, tired her. Her aunt brought to her all her boys' store of books; some Lucy had read, and some she did not care to read. Her aunt proposed her beginning a little fancy-work on muslin; Lucy said she had never loved to work since her mother died; and hiding her starting tears, she turned her back to her aunt, sat down at the window, the picture of despair, for half an hour; then complained of a violent headache, and got a bottle of Cologne and some drops her nurse had left for her; and asking her aunt if she might write a few lines to Mary, (the nurse,) she wrote the following; on which might be easily seen the traces of her tears.

"Oh, Mary, I am dreadfully homesick! Pray ask father to come next week. I am sure the country will not agree with me, for I have a miserable head-ache already. I have forgotten which box of pills you told me to take first; pray send me word by the first mail, for you know the doctor wished me to be particular about taking them; though aunt don't seem to think it of any consequence. She says she thinks country air is the best medicine for me. She is very, very kind to me; but I cannot be happy, for all that. Now, Mary, don't you for the world tell papa, or any body, what I am going to tell you; for I don't suppose aunt can afford any thing better. We had nothing for dinner to-day but boiled eggs and bread and butter!! I am afraid I shall starve to death. Give my love to papa, but do not show him this letter. Only beg him to come for me as soon as possible."

Before Lucy had quite finished her letter, she heard her cousin Liston's pleasant voice calling her. She threw her paper into her trunk, and ran down stairs. He had brought her home a nest with two young blackbirds. A sportsman had shot the mother-bird, and Liston told her he had brought them home to her care, and she must be their foster-mother. He fixed them snugly in a basket, which was to be placed out of the cat's reach; and he instructed Lucy how to take care of them.

Lucy was delighted. Above all things she said she had desired to see the wild, little living birds, in a real nest; and now she should rear them herself, and see for herself if all she had heard of their instinct was true; and she sat, with the basket on her lap, watching them till it was quite dark, and they had lain their heads under their wings, and were fast asleep. She then covered them with wool, that they might not miss the warmth of their mother brooding over them; ate a hasty but very hearty supper, (as the abundant country tea was called;) for she was anxious to see Liston prepare the mother-bird (that he had brought home for that purpose) for stuffing.

The next day she had not time to finish the letter; nor the next; nor the next; and at last, when reminded by her aunt that she had promised her father should hear once a week, she added the following

"Postscript.—My dear Mary, I have a great deal to tell you, but I shall leave it for a letter to papa. You need not speak to the doctor about the pills, for I do believe aunt was right about the country air. I have not felt a head-ache since the day you went away. For pity's sake do not say a word about aunt's dinners. To be sure, they are very different from ours; but I eat twice as much as I did at home, and it tastes forty times as good. Give my love to papa. Oh, above all, don't hurry his coming for me. In great haste, dear Mary, your affectionate and grateful friend,
Lucy."

I think my young readers would prefer to have Lucy's own account of her country pleasures. I have therefore copied the letter she wrote to her father.

"My dear Papa,—you wished me to write to you every thing that occurred to me, and especially about my health. I have not thought of it this three weeks, only when my belts pinched me; and aunt has been kind enough to let them out. I have delightful walks with aunt; and sometimes Liston is with us; but he is at work most almost all day, and it is only in the evening he can do what he chooses. Then he stuffs birds, and mounts them, and draws and paints, and reads poetry to me; and now for the first time I enjoy that which describes nature; for Liston teaches me to observe where it is true, and where it is not. I think Mr. Bryant must have lived in this part of the country; for, as Liston says, his poetry is like a mirror, in which you see these very mountains, and trees, and flowers, reflected. There is a beautiful piece about the death of the flowers, in which he says:

'The wind-flower and the violet, they perished long ago,
And the briar-rose and the orchis died amid the summer glow;
But on the hill the golden-rod, and the aster in the wood,
And the yellow sunflower by the brook in autumn beauty stood,
Till fell the frost from the clear cold heaven, as falls the plague on men,
And the brightness of their smile was gone from upland glade and glen.'

"Now, papa, as you love truth, just observe how true the poetry is. Yesterday afternoon we were walking; the air was soft, and had that sweet smell of the wild woods, that comes from the fallen leaves. The mountains, and the hollows among them, looked blue, and smoky, and far off; the golden-rod and the asters were as bright as summer flowers, and the fringed gentian

'With its sweet and quiet eye
Looked through its fringes to the sky'

I gathered my hands full of these flowers—I repeated to aunt the poetry that describes them; and I felt grateful to the poet, who had made these wild flowers seem as if they were giving me the welcome of friends to their home on the hill-side. Last night 'fell the frost from the clear cold heave,' and the flowers are blighted black, and shriveled in 'glad and glen.' Still there is beauty, and, as Liston says, a 'visible poetry' in the woods; such as I never dreamed of when I was shut up in the city. The keen frost has suddenly turned the leaves to glowing and glorious colours. I cannot describe them; but if you were here I should say, 'See, papa, just below those bare flinty crags of the mountain, see the young oaks a bright red; then masses of evergreen; a towering pine there; and there slender graceful tamaracks: and oh, see where the sun's rays slanting from that dark cloud dance along the tops of that long line of maples. The foliage of other trees turns of one colour; but that of the maple is yellow, orange, crimson, red, scarlet, purple, and bronze. Some of the branches appear as if every leaf had been dipped in sun-set dyes; and others seem as if the edge of the leaves had been crimsoned or gilded by some careful hand.

"It is as Liston says, the maple is among trees like trout among fish, and swans among birds—most beautiful in dying. But I am tiring you. I forget that which is so beautiful to me can be dull to you. I now feel what little Lizzy said after she came back to New-York: 'Oh, we have but one battery here, and it is all battery in the country.' We have such a variety of pleasures; Liston makes friends of every thing, even of bees and wasps; at least, friends of the first, and acquaintance of the last. He has opened some wasps' cells, to show me some little spiders that the wasps had enclosed in these prisons, to be food for their young. I must tell you two anecdotes of Liston's bees.

"Liston has several hives, and Mr. Davis, who lives on the next farm to aunt's, has several more. One of Mr. Davis' swarms came and made war on one of Liston's. They fought desperately, for two or three days; at last Mr. Davis' swarm submitted; but the curious part of it is, that the conquerors made slaves, or as Liston calls them, helots of their captives, and the poor creatures were compelled to convey their whole store of honey to the hives of their vanquishers. The other story is more pleasing: for, as Liston says, I hate to see that even bees can be, like men, cruel and oppressive. Liston examined one of his hives some weeks since, and found the bees had made very little honey—

not enough he thought to last them through the winter—and so thought the bees; for they went to the woods, and struck a bargain with some wild bees, whom Liston observed working with his bees, and after days they all disappeared. Liston examined the hive, and found they had carried off every particle of honey. He believes they, finding their provision was like to fall short, agreed with the wild bees to join stocks. What a long letter I have written! Farewell, dear papa. Give my love to Mary, and tell her I am no longer a drone in the hive, but as busy and happy as she would wish me.

“Your affectionate daughter, Lucy.”

“My dear Papa,—I remember once reading a true story of the Caliph Abdelrahman, who was one of the greatest and richest of all the Caliphs of Bagdad. He had an immense retinue of slaves, dressed in gold and gems. His palace was hung with tapestry of silk, embroidered with gold. Among other beautiful things, he had a large tree of solid gold, spreading into branches, and covered with gold and silver birds. There was machinery, so arranged that the leaves moved as if stirred by the wind, and the birds sang. In short, this Caliph had every thing that riches could procure; and when he died a paper was found in his closet, on which he had written: ‘Riches, honor, power, and pleasure have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting to my felicity. In this situation I have diligently numbered the happy days that have fallen to my lot; the amount to fourteen!’

“Poor Caliph Abdelrahman! In all your life, you had not half so many happy days as I have had since I came to aunt Ames’! And yet here are no riches, no slaves, no gems, no gold trees, and silver birds. But here are kind hearts,—the kindest in the world,—and minds taught to perceive the wisdom and goodness that appear in God’s works. Liston makes every thing interesting. His dog and his cat seem to have more character than most of men.

“I suppose it is because we observe them narrowly, and because Liston cultivates all their faculties. Argus, the dog, seems to hear Liston’s footstep when he is returning home, at the distance of half a mile, and runs half frantic with joy to meet him. If Liston reproves him, nobody can console him; he will not eat, nor even wag his tail, till his master receives him into favour again. But the best thing of all is to see his friendship for the cat. Argus had been gone for two days, and when he returned he fawned over Juno, and licked her face as lovingly as if they had been born friends. Liston says he does not believe there is any natural enmity between men or beasts but what may be overcome. Our cat, Juno, is a most sagacious and, as Liston says, loyal cat. Would you believe it, papa,—if she takes any mice, or other prey, when her master is absent, she hides it till he returns—does not disturb a hair of it; and when he comes in she lays it at his feet; and after he has patted and stroked her, she drags it away into some dark corner and devours it,* as cats will.

“Last year Liston had a pair of grey squirrels quite tame, who used to leap on his head and shoulders, and feed from his hand; most amusing little pets they were. Liston named them Robin Hood and Little John. They built them a cunning little house of leaves on the maple trees before the door, and they hid their winter store of nuts in different parcels. Liston says it was curious to observe the accuracy of their memories. After the snow fell, they would go precisely to the places where they had deposited their nuts, brush off the snow, and bring them to their leafy house. When the spring came, the little rogues, like Robin Hood and little John of old, preferred the revels of the merry green wood, and they scampered off; but every now and then they come to pay their liege-lord a visit. Oh, dear papa, aunt is to me what the green wood is to the squirrel; and my visit is almost finished! Do not think I shall be sorry to go home to you; but how shall I ever again live without Liston? Our big house will seem very solitary after being where we can talk to one another from one end of the house to the other—the advantage of this old rickety house, as Liston says. Old and rickety it may be; but I am sure no palace was ever pleasanter. My love to Mary, and tell her I wish she could live in the country, so that she might be sure of being far happier than the Caliph Abdelrahman.

“Your affectionate child, Lucy.”

My friend Lucy was a more faithful correspondent than most young ladies of her age, and I have still another letter of hers to present to my young readers, which I hope they will have the patience to read.

“Dear Papa, --I send you with this letter a picture which Liston has been painting, and which he says I must tell you is a present from myself! Do write me by the next mail, and tell me if you think the picture like me; and how you like the bird, and Argus; and if Juno does not look very funnily with my necklace on; and if you do not think my black prince” (the name Lucy had given her blackbird) “is a most graceful little fellow. Poor Liston; I have found out that he is not so perfectly happy as I supposed.

*As some of my readers may doubt the accuracy of Lucy’s statement, I assure them that this anecdote is literally true, of a well trained favourite, as well as the other particulars she relates of Liston’s squirrels, &c. Her cousin Liston is a friend of mine, who has La Fontaine’s power of making animals almost as interesting as his own species.

He very seldom paints now; and aunt says it is because he is so fond of it that if he indulges himself he cannot relish any other employment. I asked aunt why he did not go to N. York and learn painting for a profession. For a good while she did not give me any satisfactory answer; but I teased her, till she told me he could not support himself there while learning. Oh, papa! the thought came into my head like a flash, how pleasant it would be to have Liston live with us! And as to his support, I am certain you would rather give him that, than not. Since my dear brother is gone, should not his vacant place be filled, and that which he cannot now enjoy be given to another? If we have Liston with us, he will make all our days happy days. He is better than all the gold and gems of the Caliph of Bagdad. Do please let me know very soon how you like the plan. I have not hinted it to Liston, for I wish him to think it first comes from you; and so I am sure it would, if you knew Liston as well as I do, and had not so much business to think of. I am afraid Liston would not like to go, if he knew I had asked you to invite him. In haste, dear papa, for I am going walnutting. Oh, how pleasant to hear the nuts rattle down, when Liston throws a club among the branches. In haste,

“Your affectionate Lucy.”

The picture Lucy sent was a sketch of herself—her pretty blackbird perched on her hand, and picking a seed from off her rosy lip; Argus and Juno were playing at her feet. This packet met with a kinder fate than the one sent by Mrs. Ames. Though done up in the neatest manner, Mr. Astley opened it, and the next day wrote the following letter to Lucy:--

“My dear child,--I have received your letter and the picture. The picture surprised me. The drawing is beautiful; and the portrait precisely like you, except that my pale sickly little girl appears as ruddy and fat as a Hebe. Heaven grant your cousin has not flattered you. The hope of seeing you looking as healthy as your picture does, has already given me one of your Sultan’s happy days. I sent Liston’s picture to Mr. ----, whom I took upon as our first artist. I asked him to give me his honest opinion of the boy’s talent, and also to inform me on what terms he would give him the necessary instruction to fit him for his profession. You will like to see his answer, and I hear transcribe it for you.

“Mr. ---- presents his compliments to Mr. Astley, and informs him that he would not receive his nephew for ten thousand dollars. The boy would take the bread out of Mr. -----’s mouth.

“Seriously, my dear sir, send the lad to me as soon as possible; no time is to be lost. As to terms, I can scarcely fail to be his debtor; for all the instruction I can give will be more than remunerated by the aid he can give me in my pictures. I shall be proud of such a pupil.’

“Now, my dear Lucy, this gratifies me. I like to have young men pay their own way; it inspires them with an honorable feeling of independence, and a sense of the value of time and talent. You are right, my child; when it pleased God to take my boy, I should have given the portion thrown back upon my hands to another. Liston shall have a home with us. I will take care of his necessary expenses. If he make you happy, my dear Lucy, he will far more than repay me; for he will give us what the Caliph Abdelrahman could not buy with all his wealth.”

Inclosed in Lucy's letter was a very kind one to Mrs. Ames, from Mr. Astley, apologizing for the neglect with which he had, on a former occasion, treated her views for Liston, and closing with a proposal that he should be sent to town with Lucy; and that Mrs. Ames, her other boys being disposed of at school, should pass the winter at his house.

Perhaps my young readers have yet to learn, that it is far more difficult for a generous and delicate person to receive a favour with grace, than to bestow one. Mrs. Ames could do both. One month had not passed away before she was happily established in Mr. Astley's house; and Liston was pursuing the profession, now happily within his grasp, with the avidity and joy that belong to talent and diligence united. Lucy did not forget her mother, but she constantly felt that the friend next dearest was with her. Neither did she forget her beloved brother; but his spirit of love and cheerfulness seemed restored to her in her cousin. Gloom was banished from the house, and the sweet music of quick footsteps and happy voices resounded there.

My young friends, had the Caliph Abdelrahman employed his wealth to make others happy, would he not himself have enjoyed more than fourteen happy days?