

PRIZE ESSAY.

The Lights and Shadows of Country Life.

BY MISS FLORENCE B. M. COLLIER, ORANGEVILLE, ONT.

Were we permitted to carefully examine the picture of country life portrayed by the imagination of each individual, whose own peculiar tastes and opinions lend a coloring to the whole, we should frequently behold a picture dark and gloomy, and a prospect distasteful and repulsive.

But all are not equally uninviting, for we might find many who would willingly exchange their city life for a more retiring and quiet one.

The lights and shadows of a country life vary in particulars, according to the wealth and industry of the individual. In Canada the typical occupation of the countryman is farming; in England we have the wealthier and more scientific agriculturist; in Europe and Asia we have the fruit and spice grower, the vine dresser and the shepherd. However, though the countryman's employment differs according to the nation in which he lives, and his position in the trade world is important or unimportant according as he is poor or wealthy, peasant or farmer, nevertheless there are common advantages and drawbacks belonging to country life as seen in the old or new world.

Let us in the first place consider his daily employment. Is it not invariably peaceful and quiet? Free from the noise and bustle of a city life, where the rolling of carts in the street, the ceaseless tramp of the busy multitude, the buzzing and whirring of factories and mills, almost drive us wild, and make us long for a secluded nook into which we may creep to escape from the turbulent crowd, and commune with our own thoughts. Fresh air, out-door work, and plenty of bodily exercise, are looked upon as some of the greatest benefits of rural life. Ought we not, then, to value that path in life which will most fully develop man's bodily health and strength?

We have spoken of pure air, healthy exercise and quiet surroundings as advantages, all tending to strengthen and bring to perfection man's physical nature; but that is, perhaps, the least important element of man's person; for there is the intellect needing careful and diligent training that it may efficiently perform that work for which it was designed. But far before even this comes the soul—God's Kingdom. To purify and elevate this most valued part of our being is the chief duty of every human creature; and the lights and shadows that pass across that creature's soul are the lights and shadows of the human life.

What does a life in the country do for our mental qualities? We have seen its benefits to the physical man, but what are they to the intellectual? A fine constitution, a strong, vigorous and symmetrical body, backing a healthy and active mind, is a human creature only half developed. Here the townsman will declare the countryman must necessarily be deficient; "for," he will say, "where are his books, his schools, his society, to cultivate his mind?" But stop! hasty citizen; from what does the delicately wrought mind obtain its nourishment? From what source does the poet derive his poetry? What subtle charms and strange influences imbue the poet's mind with dreamy pictures, weird music and odd fancies that pass through his busy brain and lend a magical touch

to his poetry? It is pure healthy nature, the poet's companion; it is nature with whom the refined mind ever delights to associate; it is God's own handiwork, displaying in its every mood and aspect the Creator's wonderful skill. And who has a better chance to study the beauty and picturesqueness of nature than the rustic? Instead of the profane language caught in a passing word, the ill-natured remarks, the noisy laughter, the dust, mud and dirt, that daily greet the ears and eyes of the business man as he hurries to his work, there is the delicious notes of the little bird pouring forth sweet melody from a neighboring elm, the gentle lowing of the cattle, the busy bee humming in the scented clover, the bright flower shedding its fragrance abroad, the soft bubbling of the brook as it rolls merrily over the pebbles in its tiny bed, with the glorious sun overhead pouring down a flood of warmth and heat on the beautiful scene below.

Oh! if there is any poetry in a man's nature will not this daily companionship with things pure and beautiful nourish and strengthen it? Will not our thoughts be raised to contemplate the Maker of this glorious scene around us. But you will say, this is not all; there are schools, books, colleges, libraries and society needed to bring man's intellect to perfection.

Certainly; but cannot a country child obtain a public school training in the country? In our highly favored nation he can, and if he has not sufficient money to obtain a higher training in a college he can surely get books, and himself assist nature in bringing mental abilities nearer to perfection.

Again, you will say newspapers are delayed. Books can only be procured at long intervals, and the world will get ahead of this self-educated man. But newspapers seldom obtained will be carefully read, and you will very often find that a farmer who only gets a paper once a week will know much more about the world's doings than the man who hastily glances over his daily paper before beginning his work.

So it is with books; they are diligently read, and reread: they become wholesome food to the mind, and instead of hurriedly devouring their contents, to read the latest novel, we read slowly and thoughtfully, gradually assimilating our knowledge and making it a part of ourselves.

As for society I do not think we need lament its absence, for the countryman may create a better, purer and holier atmosphere around his own hearth than was ever breathed in the highest literary and most fashionable circles. Society has its good and evil influences, both of which the countryman escapes. Nevertheless, were he ever living in the town, and possessing the same abilities, he might still be unable to gain that right of mingling in cultured society, which is so zealously guarded. And last of all let us remember that the countryman, whatever nation be his home, holds by no means an inferior position in the commercial world. The farmer is Canada's most valuable workman, the peasant of European nations is a steady, industrious and important workman. The fruit grower and vine dresser fill important places in the crowd of France's busy workers, as well as among those of other nations. Then comes the shepherd of the east, the mountain dweller of Switzerland; their position in the world is, perhaps, not very high, but on what picture does the mind love to dwell more than on that of the wild scenery of a Swiss peasant's home, or the peaceful night scene of an eastern shepherd's watch. Thus, while one occupation towers far above the others in the nation's trade and commerce, the other touches the chords of a human heart, delights the mind with romantic fancies, and soothes the soul with peaceful and holy thoughts suggested by the surroundings of a humble and solitary workman's calling.

Thus after earnest consideration of the lights and shadows which cast bright or dark rays across a country life, we are led to the conclusion that a man with moderate wealth, and a fair share of natural abilities, will develop a stronger and more vigorous manhood were his abode in the country, than if it were in a town or city. In the latter his manners might be more polished, and his mental activities become sharper, but I am sure he could not unfold so pure and noble a soul.

Uncle Tom's Department.**MY DEAR NIECES AND NEPHEWS:—**

A new year begun. A new book of three hundred and sixty-six pages, all clean and white, lies open before you. On it the title page is written in indelible characters—1892. In some of my young friends' diaries for the past year there are marred and blotted pages, and some cut out altogether, as if the writer had grown ashamed of what was therein written. There are records, too, of other days, which are simply regrets for misspent time, and longings expressed for something better, truer and nobler, to satisfy the heart. These are the wandering, if not the wanton, desires which like tongues of flame in the evening firelight reach out into the unknown, the quality of which soon affects my boys and girls, and goes so far in the building of character for after years.

It is these desires which take a young man from a home of luxury to bear the brunt of the hardest of lives in the outposts of our country—this desire which takes possession of a boy, and makes him, if he really love the sea, submit to insults, do menial work to be, indeed, a slave without a murmur, if he be but allowed a home on the ocean wave. It is this which makes the earnest student laugh at impossibilities in the lack of money to educate him, and to work on, hope on, pray on, till his end is accomplished—his goal reached.

Nor is this lacking in the training of my nieces. Where there are several girls in the family the liking for dressmaking or millinery, for nursing or for studying, will, with patient watering and airing of the project, often bring it to pass.

It is a sad thought to many parents the amount of money spent on the education, musical or scholastic, of their children, with such small returns. Years of practice in music, and numbers of lessons, spent on a boy who by his own voluntary will lives where no instrument is at command, or, in the case of so many of our elder nieces who have married, and allowed the household duties to crowd completely out the practice which one requires to keep up if she play at all.

But we have wandered far from our new book. Let me see, we had it named, but every page was yet white and clean. What the future holds we know not. What changes have been made in the past year! Some who then were so bright and clever and beloved—who seemed the most needed, and the least likely to be taken away, have gone, and already, like the stone that sinks in the water, the place is filled.

On this January evening as you look at the leafless trees in their sober winter attire, do you think, my nieces and nephews, how there, hidden from view, the preparations for the coming spring are going on. Let us learn the lesson. In these long, quiet winter evenings, when the ice has bound lake and river, when the robe of white is over earth, when, aside from school lessons, a little feeding of stock or splitting kindling wood, snow-ballings, sleigh riding, skating, or playing shinty, there is little to take up the attention of my farm boys and girls, so, like the trees, be quietly busy making preparation of mind—food that will carry you through the coming summer, and through your after life.

Your loving

UNCLE TOM.

P. S.—I am sure you will all be looking to see who were the lucky prize winners as soon as the Advocate arrives this month, although you might guess, I fancy, who have worked faithfully all through the year. For puzzles—1st, Miss Ada Armand; 2nd, Henry Reeve; and 3rd, Fair Brother; and for answers, 1st, Henry Reeve; 2nd, Miss Ada Armand; 3rd, Miss Mattie Wood.