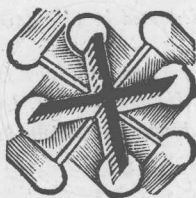


OUR VILLAGE



MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

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ESSAYS & BELLES-LETTRES

OUR VILLAGE
BY MARY RUSSELL MITFORD
EDITED, WITH AN INTRO-
DUCTION, BY SIR JOHN SQUIRE

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD was born at Alresford, Hampshire, on 16th December 1787. She won £20,000 in a lottery at the age of ten, but the extravagances of her father eventually reduced her to poverty. In 1820 she went to live in a small cottage at Three Mile Cross, on the road between Reading and Basingstoke, which was her home for more than thirty years, her one luxury being her flower garden. She was awarded a Civil List pension in 1837, and died near Reading on 10th January 1855.

INTRODUCTION

MARY RUSSELL MITFORD was born on 16th December 1787 at Alresford, Hants. Her mother was the daughter of a Dr. Russell, rector of Ash, vicar of Overton, a county magistrate, and a cadet of the Bedford family; she inherited, besides landed property, £28,000 in money. Her father, Dr. George Mitford, who had an Edinburgh medical degree, but made scant use of it, was a younger son of a younger brother of Mitford of Mitford (or Bertram) Castle in Northumberland, and an attractive, extravagant man who, by dint of gambling and high living, went through first his wife's fortune and then his daughter's, but was beloved by his daughter to the end, when, as an ageing but cheerful spinster in the country, she was working her fingers to the bone to keep him out of the clutches of his creditors. Except for brief intervals at boarding-school, in London lodgings, or staying with rich relations, Miss Mitford spent the whole of her life in county towns or small villages, now in a handsome house with an upkeep of thousands a year, now in a humble cottage with the roof falling in. The area of her wanderings was the borderland of Berkshire and Hampshire, with Reading on the north and Basingstoke on the south—not very far from the haunts of Jane Austen and White of Selborne, neither of whom was a more exact observer than she or acquainted with as wide a range of rural life. Circumstances had given her personal knowledge of prosperity and poverty, elegance and squalor, and she was directly acquainted with the houses of the great and the hovels of the labourers, as well as with those middle sorts of abodes which the mind of Jane Austen chose entirely to frequent. She herself said, late in life, of Jane Austen: 'Your admiration of Jane Austen is so far from being a heresy, that I never met any high literary people in my life who did not prefer her to any female prose writer!' So far as novelists are concerned, that may still stand; but amongst essayists, recorders of character and custom, and sensitive painters of natural scenery, Miss Mitford ranks as high as Miss Austen ranks among novelists.

Hers was a very quiet life, but much less secluded than Miss Austen's, for all her days she had streams of visitors and correspondents, from B. R. Haydon to Mrs. Browning; her letters (strung together to make a *Life*) fill three volumes, and might have filled more. She was, for a time, a successful

dramatist; her interests were universal, and she must definitely be called a learned woman. She could read at three, and was mastering Percy's Ballads shortly afterwards; and the lists that were kept of the books she read each month are astonishing, though there is enough light literature in them to prevent them from being terrifying. From early years she had strong and even pugnacious views, and the reader of her *Life* will come across many amusing, many shrewd, and many wrong opinions about her contemporaries. In 1798 she was sent to a school in Hans Place kept by a French *émigré*, M. St. Quentin. No sooner is she there than we find her correcting her head master on a point of grammar, the correction being referred to an umpire and then gracefully accepted. At twelve she begins a letter to her father (it must be remembered that they were always on the closest terms):

MY DEAR PAPA,

I sit down in order to return you thanks for the parcels I received. My uncle called on me twice while I stayed in London, but he went away in five minutes both times. He said that he only went to fetch my aunt, and would certainly take me out when he returned. I hope that I may be wrong in my opinion of my aunt; but I again repeat, I think she has the most hypocritical drawl that I ever heard.

But, lest it should be thought that at this stage she was too grown-up, I may quote a passage from a note-book written only two months later:

Nov. 30, 1800—Where shall I be this day month? At home! How happy I shall be! I may do what I like then, and shall be ready to jump out of my skin for joy.

Home was always the centre of her affections; the humblest collection of square habitations took a radiance from her eye and the most ordinary of neighbours revealed characteristics worth studying. Her love of home had to stand many tests, considering how reckless was her charming father and how dim and helpless, if devoted, her mother.

Her mother's patrimony had all gone, and the house at Alresford, within eight or nine years of the marriage; a year at Lyme Regis followed, and then lodgings across Blackfriars Bridge and a refuge from creditors within the rules of King's Bench. The next escape cannot be better told than in the words of the Revs. Harness and L'Estrange, who wrote the official *Life*:

From this depressed state of their affairs the family were delivered by a prize in the lottery. The circumstances under which the ticket in this lottery was purchased were curious.

The doctor took his little girl with him to the lottery office to choose the number, and a quantity of tickets were laid down on the counter for her to select from. She at once fixed upon the number 2,224. . . . The sixteenth she had fixed her heart upon she carried home with her; the remaining shares of the number were bought up from the other offices, at a considerable advance in price; and the doctor, on the drawing of the lottery, received £20,000, the largest prize that was then given, as the fruit of—we cannot say, his wisdom and discretion.

This prize, amounting to about £100,000 in our money, might, one would think, have sufficed for even Mr. Micawber or Mr. Skimpole to keep the duns at bay. Not in the least. Off went the doctor to a new house at Reading; once more the family prosperity soon hung in fearful hazards on the fleetness of the doctor's greyhounds or the number of his trumps at whist. By 1802 we see the family not merely purchasing a Tudor house and seventy acres at Grasely, near Reading, but pulling the strong old place down to build a correct residence in the Georgian manner, named Bertram House, after the family castle. That year Mary left school, and by 1804 she and her mother, though not always her father, were settled in the new house. By 1820 the family were once more penniless, except for a reserved fragment of Mrs. Mitford's dowry and what could be by that time be earned by the daughter. They moved to a cottage—'no, not a cottage—it does not deserve the name'—at Three Mile Cross, near Reading, consisting of 'a series of closets, the largest of which may be about eight feet square. . . . On one side a public house, on the other a village shop, and right opposite a cobbler's stall.' Even that did not depress Miss Mitford, at any rate externally. 'Notwithstanding all this,' she wrote to her friend Sir William Elford, the painter:

the cabin, as Bobadil says, is convenient. It is within reach of my dear old walks; the banks where I find my violets; the meadows full of cowslips; and the woods where the wood-sorrel blows. We are all beginning to get settled and comfortable, and resuming our usual habits. Papa has already had the satisfaction of setting the neighbourhood to rights by committing a disorderly person, who was the pest of the Cross, to Bridewell. Mamma has furnished up an old dairy and made it into a not in-commodious store room. I have lost my only key, and stuffed the garden with flowers. My little dog Molly, after a good deal of staring and squeaking and running about (she seemed conscious of some degradation from the change), has at last pitched upon a chair to lie on when I turn her out of my lap; and the great white cat, who was likewise very eloquent and out of his wits, has given this very evening most satisfactory proofs of finding himself at home, by resuming his ancient

predatory habits and stealing all the milk for our tea. (N.B.—We were forced to go without.) Moreover, it is an excellent lesson in condensation—one which we all wanted.

There, at the end of 1829, Mrs. Mitford died, and in December 1842 Dr. Mitford. He was in debt, and his daughter wrote: 'Everybody shall be paid, if I sell the gown off my back or pledge my little pension'—£120 a year from the Civil List. Friends, however, raised a subscription of over a thousand pounds, Queen Victoria privately contributing. There was one more move more, to Swallowfield (six miles from Reading) in 1850. There Miss Mitford died, on 10th January 1855, and after a life of hard work, illness, and vicissitude, she was but three days from her grave when she could write a letter about robins and sparrows and thank God that she had preserved 'my love of poetry and literature, my cheerfulness, and my enjoyment of little things.'

Her poems and plays are unlikely to return to favour, even though *Rienzi*, *Charles I*, and the other dramas (oddly, for her, full of dukes and desperadoes) were successful in their day. Her letters and recollections will always be read by the sagacious, and *Our Village* is a classic. The sketches contained in it were first published in the *Lady's Magazine* and appeared in five volumes (1824-32), and in two volumes, not quite complete, in Paris in 1839.

They are uneven, though I hope the best of them are here. They are not all about one village or indeed any village: she drew on her memory for scenes and characters of all kinds and from all periods of her early life. But mostly she stayed round Reading, dwelling upon familiar rustic people, places, and seasons. She is equally felicitous painting portraits (not least of people with humours), describing domestic backgrounds, and taking 'country walks' in all weathers. He who should wish to recover the 'interiors' of the period, the furniture, china, and fabrics in whatever rank of house, can find more in her than in any novelist; she is as faithful and full with the 'low life' of labourers and publicans, keepers, poachers, and milkmaids, as George Morland himself; to read her is to live in her village. But her finest prose is to be found in those papers such as *Frost and Thaw*, and *The First Primrose*, in which she united the detail of Richard Jefferies with a quiet perfection of prose all her own.

And, not least, the reader of these papers gets to know Miss Mitford herself—the charming little plain woman with beautiful eyes and speech; wise, witty, humorous, intellectual, plain-spoken, modest, satirical, and tender, who lives on every page. Small she was and delicate, and no Diana: she was once on a donkey which threw her into a pond: her sporting exploits consisted in watching village cricket, which thoroughly excited her. But she was countrywoman by nature and choice, loving

bird, beast, and flower, storm and sunshine, all the pageant of the seasons and the beauties and queernesses which, in man as elsewhere, spring direct from the soil—and English soil at that. She found all she wanted in a few square miles, and knew it. 'Even in books,' she said, 'I like a confined locality.'

J. C. SQUIRE.

The following is a list of the works of Mary Russell Mitford with the dates of their first publication in book form:

Poems, 1810; *Christina: the Maid of the South Seas* (a poem), 1811; *Blanche of Castile*, 1812; *Watlington Hill* (a poem), 1812; *Narrative Poems on the Female Character* (Vol. I only; no more published), 1813; *Julian: a Tragedy*, 1823; *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (5 vols.), 1824, 1826, 1828, 1830, 1832; *Foscari: a Tragedy*, 1826; *Dramatic Scenes, Sonnets, and other Poems*, 1827; *Rienzi: a Tragedy*, 1828; *Mary Queen of Scots: a Scena in Verse*, 1831; *Charles the First: an Historical Tragedy*, 1834; *Belford Regis: Sketches of a Country Town* (3 vols.), 1835; *Sadak and Kalasrade, or the Waters of Oblivion: a Romantic Opera*, 1835; *Country Stories*, 1837; *Recollections of a Literary Life* (3 vols.), 1852; *Atherton and other Tales* (3 vols.), 1854.

Mary Russell Mitford edited *Stories of American Life*, 1832; and *Finden's Tableaux* (an annual), 1838-41. She also contributed to *The Edinburgh Tales*, conducted by Mrs. C. I. Johnstone, 1845-6; and to the *London Magazine* and the *Reading Mercury*.

Collected editions: *The Works of Mary Russell Mitford, Prose and Verse*, 1841 (published in Philadelphia); *Dramatic Works* (2 vols.), 1854.

Biographies, etc.: *The Life of Mary Russell Mitford* (related in a selection from her letters to her friends), edited by the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange, 1870. *Letters, Second Series*, edited by Henry Chorley, 1872. *The Friendships of Mary Russell Mitford* (as recorded in letters from her literary correspondents), edited by the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange, 1882. *Mary Russell Mitford: the Tragedy of a Blue Stocking*, by W. J. Roberts, 1913. *Correspondence with Charles Boner and John Ruskin*, 1914. *Mary Russell Mitford and her Surroundings*, by Constance Hill, 1920. *Selected Letters*, edited by R. Brimley Johnson, 1925. *Mary Russell Mitford: Her Circle and Her Books*, by Marjorie Astin, 1930.

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TO
HER ONLY SURVIVING RELATIVE
AND MOST CHERISHED FRIEND,
HER BELOVED AND VENERABLE FATHER,
These Volumes

FULL OF ENDEARING RECOLLECTIONS OF THE
BEAUTIFUL SCENERY WHERE THEY HAVE
SO OFTEN WANDERED, AND OF THE VILLAGE HOME
WHERE FOR SO MANY YEARS
THEY HAVE DWELT TOGETHER IN WEAL OR IN WOE,
ARE
VERY AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED
BY
THE AUTHOR

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THE following pages contain an attempt to delineate country scenery and country manners, as they exist in a small village in the south of England. The writer may at least claim the merit of a hearty love of her subject, and of that local and personal familiarity which only a long residence in one neighbourhood could have enabled her to attain. Her descriptions have always been written on the spot, and at the moment, and, in nearly every instance, with the closest and most resolute fidelity to the place and the people. If she be accused of having given a brighter aspect to her villagers than is usually met with in books, she cannot help it, and would not if she could. She has painted, as they appeared to her, their little frailties and their many virtues, under an intense and thankful conviction that, in every condition of life, goodness and happiness may be found by those who seek them, and never more surely than in the fresh air, the shade, and the sunshine of nature.

CHAPTER I

OUR VILLAGE

OF all situations for a constant residence, that which appears to me most delightful is a little village far in the country; a small neighbourhood, not of fine mansions finely peopled, but of cottages and cottage-like houses, 'messuages or tenements,' as a friend of mine calls such ignoble and nondescript dwellings, with inhabitants whose faces are as familiar to us as the flowers in our garden; a little world of our own, close-packed and insulated like ants in an ant-hill, or bees in a hive, or sheep in a fold, or nuns in a convent, or sailors in a ship; where we know every one, are known to every one, interested in every one, and authorized to hope that every one feels an interest in us. How pleasant it is to slide into these true-hearted feelings from the kindly and unconscious influence of habit, and to learn to know and to love the people about us, with all their peculiarities, just as we learn to know and to love the nooks and turns of the shady lanes and sunny commons that we pass every day! Even in books I like a confined locality, and so do the critics when they talk of the unities. Nothing is so tiresome as to be whirled half over Europe at the chariot-wheels of a hero, to go to sleep at Vienna and awaken at Madrid; it produces a real fatigue, a weariness of spirit. On the other hand, nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen's delicious novels, quite sure before we leave it to become intimate with every spot and every person it contains; or to ramble with Mr. White¹ over his own parish of Selborne, and form a friendship with the fields and coppices, as well as with the birds, mice, and squirrels who inhabit them; or to sail with Robinson Crusoe to his island, and live there with him, and his goats, and his man

¹ White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, one of the most fascinating books ever written. I wonder that no naturalist has adopted the same plan.

Friday—how much we dread any new-comers, any fresh importation of savage or sailor! we never sympathize for moment in our hero's want of company, and are quit grieved when he gets away; or to be shipwrecked with Ferdinand on that other, lovelier island—the island of Prospero, and Miranda, and Caliban, and Ariel, and nobody else, none of Dryden's exotic inventions—that is best of all. And a small neighbourhood is as good in sober waking reality as in poetry or prose; a village neighbourhood, such as this Berkshire hamlet in which I write, a long, straggling, winding street, at the bottom of a fine eminence, with a road through it, always abounding in carts, horsemen, and carriages, and lately enlivened by a stage-coach from B—to S—, which passed through about ten days ago, and will, I suppose, return some time or other. There are coaches of all varieties nowadays: perhaps this may be intended for a monthly diligence, or a fortnightly fly. Will you walk with me through our village, courteous reader? The journey is not long. We will begin at the lower end, and proceed up the hill.

The tidy, square, red cottage on the right hand, with the long well-stocked garden by the side of the road, belongs to a retired publican from a neighbouring town; a substantial person with a comely wife; one who piques himself on independence and idleness, talks politics, reads newspapers, hates the minister, and cries out for reform. He introduced into our peaceful vicinage the rebellious innovation of an illumination on the queen's acquittal. Remonstrance and persuasion were in vain; he talked of liberty and broken windows—so we all lighted up. Oh! how he shone that night with candles, and laurel, and white bows, and gold paper, and a transparency (originally designed for a pocket-handkerchief) with a flaming portrait of Her Majesty, hatted and feathered, in red ochre. He had no rival in the village, that we all acknowledged; the very bonfire was less splendid; the little boys reserved their best crackers to be expended in his honour, and he gave them full sixpence more than any one else. He would like an illumination once a month; for it must not be concealed, that in spite of gardening, of newspaper reading, of jaunting about in his little cart, and frequenting both church and meeting, our worthy neighbour

begins to feel the weariness of idleness. He hangs over his gate, and tries to entice passengers to stop and chat; he volunteers little jobs all round, smokes cherry-trees to cure the blight, and traces and blows up all the wasp-nests in the parish. I have seen a great many wasps in our garden to-day, and shall enchant him with the intelligence. He even assists his wife in her sweepings and dustings. Poor man! he is a very respectable person, and would be a very happy one, if he would add a little employment to his dignity. It would be the salt of life to him.

Next to his house, though parted from it by another long garden with a yew arbour at the end, is the pretty dwelling of the shoemaker, a pale, sickly-looking, black-haired man, the very model of sober industry. There he sits in his little shop, from early morning till late at night. An earthquake would hardly stir him: the illumination did not. He stuck immovably to his last, from the first lighting up, through the long blaze and the slow decay, till his large solitary candle was the only light in the place. One cannot conceive anything more perfect than the contempt which the man of transparencies and the man of shoes must have felt for each other on that evening. There was at least as much vanity in the sturdy industry as in the strenuous idleness, for our shoemaker is a man of substance, he employs three journeymen, two lame, and one a dwarf, so that his shop looks like a hospital; he has purchased the lease of his commodious dwelling—some even say that he has bought it out and out; and he has only one pretty daughter, a light, delicate, fair-haired girl of fourteen, the champion, protectress, and playfellow of every brat under three years old, whom she jumps, dances, dandles, and feeds all day long. A very attractive person is that child-loving girl. I have never seen any one in her station who possessed so thoroughly that undefinable charm, the lady-look. See her on a Sunday in her simplicity and her white frock, and she might pass for an earl's daughter. She likes flowers too, and has a profusion of white stocks under her window, as pure and delicate as herself.

The first house on the opposite side of the way is the blacksmith's; a gloomy dwelling, where the sun never seems to shine; dark and smoky within and without, like a