MARY RUSSELL MITFORD

OUR VILLAGE

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Introduction by Anne Thackeray Ritchie

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I.

There is a great deal of admirable literature concerning Miss Mitford, so much of it indeed, that the writer of this little notice feels as if she almost owed an apology to those who remember, for having ventured to write, on hearsay only, and without having ever known or ever seen the author of 'Our Village.' And yet, so vivid is the homely friendly presence, so clear the sound of that voice 'like a chime of bells,' with its hospitable cheery greeting, that she can scarcely realise that this acquaintance exists only in the world of the might-have-beens.

For people who are beginning to remember, rather than looking forward any more, there certainly exists no more delightful reading than the memoirs and stories of heroes and heroines, many of whom we ourselves may have seen, and to whom we may have spoken. As we read on we are led into some happy bygone region,—such as that one described by Mr. du Maurier in 'Peter Ibbetson,'—a region in which we ourselves, together with all our friends and acquaintances, grow young again;—very young, very brisk, very hopeful. The people we love are there, along with the people we remember. Music begins to play, we are dancing, laughing, scampering over the country once more; our parents too are young and laughing cheerily. Every now and then perhaps some old friend, also vigorous and hopeful, bursts into the book, and begins to talk or to write a letter;

early sights and sounds return to us, we have NOW, and we have THEN, in a pleasant harmony. To those of a certain literary generation who read Miss Mitford's memoirs, how many such familiar presences and names must appear and reappear. Not least among them that of her biographer, Mr. Harness himself, who was so valued by his friends. Mrs. Kemble, Mrs. Sartoris, Charles Allston Collins, always talked of him with a great respect and tenderness. I used to think they had a special voice with which to speak his name. He was never among our intimate friends, but how familiar to my recollection are the two figures, that of Mr. Harness and Miss Harness, his sister and housekeeper, coming together along the busy Kensington roadway. The brother and sister were like characters out of some book, with their kind faces, their simple spiritual ways; in touch with so much that was interesting and romantic, and in heart with so much that suffered. I remember him with grey hair and a smile. He was not tall; he walked rather lame; Miss Harness too was little, looking up at all the rest of the world with a kind round face and sparkling eyes fringed with thick lashes. Mary Mitford was indeed happy in her friends, as happy as she was unfortunate in her nearer relations.

With much that is sad, there is a great deal of beauty and enjoyment in Miss Mitford's life. For her the absence of material happiness was made up for by the presence of warm-hearted sensibility, of enthusiasm, by her devotion to her parents. Her long endurance and filial piety are very remarkable, her loving heart carried her safely to the end, and she found comfort in her unreasoning life's devotion. She had none of the restlessness which is so apt to spoil

much that might be harmonious; all the charm of a certain unity and simplicity of motive is hers, 'the single eye,' of which Charles Kingsley wrote so sweetly. She loved her home, her trees, her surrounding lanes and commons. She loved her friends. Her books and flowers are real and important events in her life, soothing and distracting her from the contemplation of its constant anxieties. 'I may truly say,' she once writes to Miss Barrett, 'that ever since I was a very young girl, I have never (although for some years living apparently in affluence) been without pecuniary care,—the care that pressed upon my thoughts the last thing at night, and woke in the morning with a dreary sense of pain and pressure, of something which weighed me to the earth.'

Mary Russell Mitford was born on the 16th of December 1787. She was the only child of her parents, who were well connected; her mother was an heiress. Her father belonged to the Mitfords of the North. She describes herself as 'a puny child, with an affluence of curls which made her look as if she were twin sister to her own great doll.' She could read at three years old; she learnt the Percy ballads by heart almost before she could read. Long after, she used to describe how she first studied her beloved ballads in the breakfast-room lined with books, warmly spread with its Turkey carpet, with its bright fire, easy chairs, and the windows opening to a garden full of flowers,—stocks, honeysuckles, and pinks. It is touching to note how, all through her difficult life, her path was (literally) lined with flowers, and how the love of them comforted and cheered her from the first to the very last. In her saddest hours, the passing fragrance and beauty of her favourite geraniums cheered and revived her. Even when

her mother died she found comfort in the plants they had tended together, and at the very last breaks into delighted descriptions of them.

She was sent to school in the year 1798 to No. 22 Hans Place, to a Mrs. St. Quintin's. It seems to have been an excellent establishment. Mary learnt the harp and astronomy; her taste for literature was encouraged. The young ladies, attired as shepherdesses, were also taught to skip through many mazy movements, but she never distinguished herself as a shepherdess. She had greater success in her literary efforts, and her composition 'on balloons' was much applauded. She returned to her home in 1802. 'Plain in figure and in face, she was never common-looking,' says Mr. Harness. He gives a pretty description of her as 'no ordinary child, her sweet smiles, her animated conversation, her keen enjoyment of life, and her gentle voice won the love and admiration of her friends, whether young or old.' Mr. Harness has chiefly told Miss Mitford's story in her own words by quotations from her letters, and, as one reads, one can almost follow her moods as they succeed each other, and these moods are her real history. The assiduity of childhood, the bright enthusiasm and gaiety of her early days, the growing anxiety of her later life, the maturer judgments, the occasional despairing terrors which came to try her bright nature, but along with it all, that innocent and enduring hopefulness which never really deserted her. Her elastic spirit she owed to her father, that incorrigible old Skimpole. 'I am generally happy everywhere,' she writes in her youth—and then later on: 'It is a great pleasure to me to love and to admire, this is a

faculty which has survived many frosts and storms.' It is true that she adds a query somewhere else, 'Did you ever remark how superior old gaiety is to new?' she asks.

Her handsome father, her plain and long-enduring mother, are both unconsciously described in her correspondence. 'The Doctor's manners were easy, natural, cordial, and apparently extremely frank,' says Mr. Harness, 'but he nevertheless met the world on its own terms, and was prepared to allow himself any insincerity which seemed expedient. He was not only recklessly extravagant, but addicted to high play. His wife's large fortune, his daughter's, his own patrimony, all passed through his hands in an incredibly short space of time, but his wife and daughter were never heard to complain of his conduct, nor appeared to admire him less.'

The story of Miss Mitford's 20,000 pounds is unique among the adventures of authoresses. Dr. Mitford, having spent all his wife's fortune, and having brought his family from a comfortable home, with flowers and a Turkey carpet, to a small lodging near Blackfriars Bridge, determined to present his daughter with an expensive lottery ticket on the occasion of her tenth birthday. She had a fancy for No. 2224, of which the added numbers came to 10. This number actually came out the first prize of 20,000 pounds, which money started the family once more in comparative affluence. Dr. Mitford immediately built a new square house, which he calls Bertram House, on the site of a pretty old farmhouse which he causes to be pulled down. He also orders a dessert-service painted with the Mitford arms; Mrs.

Mitford is supplied with a carriage, and she subscribes to a circulating library.

A list still exists of the books taken out by her for her daughter's use; some fifty-five volumes a month, chiefly trash: 'Vicenza,' 'A Sailor's Friendship and Soldier's Love,' 'Clarentina,' 'Robert and Adela,' 'The Count de Valmont,' 'The Three Spaniards,' 'De Clifford' (in four volumes) and so on.

The next two or three years were brilliant enough; for the family must have lived at the rate of three or four thousand a year. Their hospitality was profuse, they had servants, carriages, they bought pictures and furniture, they entertained. Cobbett was among their intimate friends. The Doctor naturally enough invested in a good many more lottery tickets, but without any further return.

The ladies seem to take it as a matter of course that he should speculate and gamble at cards, and indeed do anything and everything he fancied, but they beg him at least to keep to respectable clubs. He is constantly away. His daughter tries to tempt him home with the bloom of her hyacinths. 'How they long to see him again!' she says, 'how greatly have they been disappointed, when, every day, the journey to Reading has been fruitless. The driver of the Reading coach is quite accustomed to being waylaid by their carriage.' Then she tells him about the primroses, but neither hyacinths nor primroses bring the Doctor away from his cards. Finally, the rhododendrons and the azaleas are in bloom, but these also fail to attract him.

Miss Mitford herself as she grows up is sent to London more than once, to the St. Quintin's and elsewhere. She

goes to the play and to Westminster Hall, she sees her hero, Charles James Fox, and has the happiness of watching him helped on to his horse. Mr. Romilly delights her, but her greatest favourite of all is Mr. Whitbread. 'You know I am always an enthusiast,' she writes, 'but at present it is impossible to describe the admiration I feel for this exalted character.' She speaks of his voice 'which she could listen to with transport even if he spoke in an unknown language!' she writes a sonnet to him, 'an impromptu, on hearing Mr. Whitbread declare in Westminster Hall that he fondly trusted his name would descend to posterity.'

'The hope of Fame thy noble bosom fires,
Nor vain the hope thy ardent mind inspires;
In British breasts whilst Purity remains,
Whilst Liberty her blessed abode retains,
Still shall the muse of History proclaim
To future ages thy immortal name!'

There are many references to the celebrities of the time in her letters home,—every one agrees as to the extreme folly of Sheridan's entertainments, Mrs. Opie is spoken of as a rising authoress, etc. etc. etc.

Miss Austen used to go to 23 Hans Place, and Miss Mitford used to stay at No. 22, but not at the same time. Mrs. Mitford had known Miss Austen as a child. She may perhaps be forgiven for some prejudice and maternal jealousy, in her later impressions, but Mary Mitford admired Jane Austen always with warmest enthusiasm. She writes to her mother at length from London, describing everything, all the people and books and experiences that she comes across,—the elegant suppers at Brompton, the Grecian

lamps, Mr. Barker's beauty, Mr. Plummer's plainness, and the destruction of her purple gown.

Mrs. Mitford writes back in return describing Reading festivities, 'an agreeable dinner at Doctor Valpy's, where Mrs. Women and Miss Peacock are present and Mr. J. Simpson, M.P.; the dinner very good, two full courses and one remove, the soup giving place to one quarter of lamb.' Mrs. Mitford sends a menu of every dinner she goes to.

In 1806 Dr. Mitford takes his daughter, who was then about nineteen, to the North to visit his relations; they are entertained by the grandparents of the Trevelyans and the Swinburnes, the Ogles and the Mitfords of the present day. They fish in Sir John Swinburne's lake, they visit at Alnwick Castle. Miss Mitford kept her front hair in papers till she reached Alnwick, nor was her dress discomposed though she had travelled thirty miles. They sat down, sixty-five to dinner, which was 'of course' (she somewhat magnificently says) entirely served on plate. Poor Mary's pleasure is very much dashed by the sudden disappearance of her father,—Dr. Mitford was in the habit of doing anything he felt inclined to do at once and on the spot, quite irrespectively of the convenience of others,—and although a party had been arranged on purpose to meet him in the North, and his daughter was counting on his escort to return home, (people posted in those days, they did not take their tickets direct from Newcastle to London), Dr. Mitford one morning leaves word that he has gone off to attend the Reading election, where his presence was not in the least required. For the first and apparently for the only time in her life his daughter protests. 'Mr. Ogle is extremely offended; nothing but your

immediate return can ever excuse you to him! I IMPLORE you to return, I call upon Mamma's sense of propriety to send you here directly. Little did I suspect that my father, my beloved father, would desert me at this distance from home! Every one is surprised.' Dr. Mitford was finally persuaded to travel back to Northumberland to fetch his daughter.

The constant companionship of Dr. Mitford must have given a curious colour to his good and upright daughter's views of life. Adoring her father as she did, she must have soon accustomed herself to take his fine speeches for fine actions, to accept his self-complacency in the place of a conscience. She was a woman of warm impressions, with a strong sense of right. But it was not within her daily experience, poor soul, that people who did not make grand professions were ready to do their duty all the same; nor did she always depend upon the uprightness, the courage, the self-denial of those who made no protestations. At that time loud talking was still the fashion, and loud living was considered romantic. They both exist among us, but they are less admired, and there is a different language spoken now to that of Dr. Mitford and his school. * This must account for some of Miss Mitford's judgments of what she calls a 'cynical' generation, to which she did little justice.

*People nowadays are more ready to laugh than to admire when
they hear the lions bray; for mewing and bleating, the
taste, I fear, is on the increase.

II.

There is one penalty people pay for being authors, which is that from cultivating vivid impressions and mental

pictures they are apt to take fancies too seriously and to mistake them for reality. In story-telling this is well enough, and it interferes with nobody; but in real history, and in one's own history most of all, this faculty is apt to raise up bogies and nightmares along one's path; and while one is fighting imaginary demons, the good things and true are passed by unnoticed, the best realities of life are sometimes overlooked....

But after all, Mary Russell Mitford, who spent most of her time gathering figs off thistles and making the best of her difficult circumstances, suffered less than many people do from the influence of imaginary things.

She was twenty-three years old when her first book of poems was published; so we read in her letters, in which she entreats her father not to curtail ANY of the verses addressed to him; there is no reason, she says, except his EXTREME MODESTY why the verses should be suppressed,—she speaks not only with the fondness of a daughter but with the sensibility of a poet. Our young authoress is modest, although in print; she compares herself to Crabbe (as Jane Austen might have done), and feels 'what she supposes a farthing candle would experience when the sun rises in all its glory.' Then comes the Publisher's bill for 59 pounds; she is quite shocked at the bill, which is really exorbitant! In her next letter Miss Mitford reminds her father that the taxes are still unpaid, and a correspondence follows with somebody asking for a choice of the Doctor's pictures in payment for the taxes. The Doctor is in London all the time, dining out and generally amusing himself. Everybody is speculating whether Sir Francis Burdett will go to the

Tower.* 'Oh, my darling, how I envy you at the fountain-head of intelligence in these interesting times! How I envy Lady Burdett for the fine opportunity she has to show the heroism of our sex!' writes the daughter, who is only encountering angry tax-gatherers at home.... Somehow or other the bills are paid for the time, and the family arrangements go on as before.

*Here, in our little suburban garden at Wimbledon, are the remains of an old hedgerow which used to grow in the kitchen garden of the Grange where Sir Francis Burdett then lived. The tradition is that he was walking in the lane in his own kitchen garden when he was taken up and carried off to honourable captivity.—A.T.R.

Besides writing to the members of her own home, Miss Mitford started another correspondent very early in life; this was Sir William Elford, to whom she describes her outings and adventures, her visits to Tavistock House, where her kind friends the Perrys receive her. Mr. Perry was the editor of the Morning Chronicle; he and his beautiful wife were the friends of all the most interesting people of the day. Here again the present writer's own experiences can interpret the printed page, for her own first sight of London people and of London society came to her in a little house in Chesham Place, where her father's old friends, Mrs. Frederick Elliot and Miss Perry, the daughters of Miss Mitford's friends, lived with a very notable and interesting set of people, making a social centre, by that kindly unconscious art which cannot be defined; that quick apprehension, that benevolent fastidiousness (I have to use rather far-fetched words) which are so essential to good hosts and hostesses. A different

standard is looked for now, by the rising generations knocking at the doors, behind which the dignified past is lying as stark as King Duncan himself!

Among other entertainments Miss Mitford went to the fetes which celebrated the battle of Vittoria; she had also the happiness of getting a good sight of Mme. de Stael, who was a great friend of the Perrys. 'She is almost as much followed in the gardens as the Princess,' she says, pouring out her wonders, her pleasures, her raptures. She begins to read Burns with youthful delight, dilates upon his exhaustless imagination, his versatility, and then she suggests a very just criticism. 'Does it not appear' she says, 'that versatility is the true and rare characteristic of that rare thing called genius—versatility and playfulness;' then she goes on to speak of two highly-reputed novels just come out and ascribed to Lady Morley, 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'Sense and Sensibility.'

She is still writing from Bertram House, but her pleasant gossip continually alternates with more urgent and less agreeable letters addressed to her father. Lawyers' clerks are again calling with notices and warnings, tax-gatherers are troubling. Dr. Mitford has, as usual, left no address, so that she can only write to the 'Star Office,' and trust to chance. 'Mamma joins in tenderest love,' so the letters invariably conclude.

Notwithstanding the adoration bestowed by the ladies of the family and their endearing adjectives, Mr. Harness is very outspoken on the subject of the handsome Doctor! He disliked his manners, his morals, his self-sufficiency, his loud talk. 'The old brute never informed his friends of anything;

all they knew of him or his affairs, or whatever false or true he intended them to believe, came out carelessly in his loose, disjointed talk.'

In 1814 Miss Mitford is living on still with her parents at Bertram House, but a change has come over their home; the servants are gone, the gravel turned to moss, the turf into pasture, the shrubberies to thickets, the house a sort of new 'ruin half inhabited, and a Chancery suit is hanging over their heads.' Meantime some news comes to cheer her from America. Two editions of her poems have been printed and sold. 'Narrative Poems on the Female Character' proved a real success. 'All who have hearts to feel and understandings to discriminate, must wish you health and leisure to complete your plan,' so write publishers in those golden days, with complimentary copies of the work....

Great things are happening all this time; battles are being fought and won, Napoleon is on his way to St. Helena; London is in a frenzy of rejoicings, entertainings, illuminations. To Mary Mitford the appearance of 'Waverley' seems as great an event as the return of the Bourbons; she is certain that 'Waverley' is written by Sir Walter Scott, but 'Guy Mannering,' she thinks, is by another hand: her mind is full of a genuine romantic devotion to books and belles lettres, and she is also rejoicing, even more, in the spring-time of 1816. Dr. Mitford may be impecunious and their affairs may be threadbare, but the lovely seasons come out ever in fresh beauty and abundance. The coppices are carpeted with primroses, with pansies and wild strawberry blossom,—the woods are spangled with the delicate flowers of the woodsorrel and wood anemone, the meadows

enamelled with cowslips.... Certainly few human beings were ever created more fit for this present world, and more capable of admiring and enjoying its beauties, than Miss Mitford, who only desired to be beautiful herself, she somewhere says, to be perfectly contented.

III.

Most people's lives are divided into first, second and third volumes; and as we read Miss Mitford's history it forms no exception to the rule. The early enthusiastic volume is there, with its hopes and wild judgments, its quaint old-fashioned dress and phraseology; then comes the second volume, full of actual work and serious responsibility, with those childish parents to provide for, whose lives, though so protracted, never seem to reach beyond their nurseries. Miss Mitford's third volume is retrospective; her growing infirmities are courageously endured, there is the certainty of success well earned and well deserved; we realise her legitimate hold upon the outer world of readers and writers, besides the reputation which she won upon the stage by her tragedies.

The literary ladies of the early part of the century in some ways had a very good time of it. A copy of verses, a small volume of travels, a few tea-parties, a harp in one corner of the room, and a hat and feathers worn rather on one side, seemed to be all that was wanted to establish a claim to fashion and inspiration. They had footstools to rest their satin shoes upon, they had admirers and panegyrists to their heart's content, and above all they possessed that peculiar complacency in which (with a few notable exceptions) our age is singularly deficient. We are earnest,

we are audacious, we are original, but we are not complacent. THEY were dolls perhaps, and lived in dolls' houses; WE are ghosts without houses at all; we come and go wrapped in sheets of newspaper, holding flickering lights in our hands, paraffin lamps, by the light of which we are seeking our proper sphere. Poor vexed spirits! We do not belong to the old world any more! The new world is not yet ready for us. Even Mr. Gladstone will not let us into the House of Commons; the Geographical Society rejects us, so does the Royal Academy; and yet who could say that any of their standards rise too high! Some one or two are happily safe, carried by the angels of the Press to little altars and pinnacles all their own; but the majority of hard-working, intelligent women, 'contented with little, yet ready for more,' may they not in moments of depression be allowed to picture to themselves what their chances might have been had they only been born half a century earlier?

Miss Mitford, notwithstanding all her troubles (she has been known to say she had rather be a washerwoman than a literary lady), had opportunities such as few women can now obtain. One is lost in admiration at the solidity of one's grandparents' taste, when one attempts to read the tragedies they delighted in, and yet 'Rienzi' sold four thousand copies and was acted forty-five times; and at one time Miss Mitford had two tragedies rehearsed upon the boards together; one at Covent Garden and one at Drury Lane, with Charles Kemble and Macready disputing for her work. Has not one also read similar descriptions of the triumphs of Hannah More, or of Johanna Baillie; cheered by enthusiastic audiences, while men shed tears.*