TOWN VERSUS COUNTRY

Mary Russell Mitford

"I'm desperately afear'd, Sue, that that brother of thine will turn out a jackanapes," was the apostrophe of the good yeoman Michael Howe, to his pretty daughter Susan, as they were walking one fine afternoon in harvest through some narrow and richly wooded lanes, which wound between the crofts of his farm of Rutherford West, situate in that out-of-the-way part of Berkshire which is emphatically called "the Low Country," for no better reason that I can discover than that it is the very hilliest part of the royal county. "I'm sadly afear'd, Sue, that he'll turn out a jackanapes!"—and the stout farmer brandished the tall paddle which served him at once as a walking stick and a weeding-hook, and began vigorously eradicating the huge thistles which grew by the roadside, as a mere vent for his vexation. "You'll see that he'll come back an arrant puppy," quoth Michael Howe.

"Oh, father! don't say so," rejoined Susan, "why should you think so hardly of poor William—our own dear William, whom we have not seen these three years? What earthly harm has he done?"

"Harm, girl! Look at his letters! You know you're ashamed yourself to take 'em of the postman. Pink paper, forsooth, and blue ink, and a seal with bits of make-believe gold speckled about in it like a ladybird's wings—I hate all make-believes, all shams; they're worse than poison;—and stinking of some outlandish scent, so that I'm forced to smoke a couple of pipes extra to get rid of the smell; and latterly, as if this folly was not enough, he has crammed these precious scrawls into a sort of paper-bag, pasted together just as if o' purpose to make us pay double postage. Jackanapes did I call him? He's a worse mollycot than a woman."

"Dear father, all young men will be foolish one way or another; and you know my uncle says, that William is wonderfully steady for so young a man, and his master is so well pleased with him, that he is now foreman in his great concern. You must pardon a little nonsense in a country youth, thrown suddenly into a fine shop in the gayest part of London, and with his godfather's legacy coming unexpectedly upon him, and making him too rich for a journeyman tradesman. But he's coming to see us now. He would have come six months ago, as soon as he got this money, if his master could have spared him; and he'll be wiser before he goes back to London."

"Not he. Hang; Lunnon! Why did he go to Lunnon at all? Why could not he stop at Rutherford like his father and his father's father, and see to the farm? What business had he in a great shop?—a man-mercer's they call it What call had he to Lunnon, I say? Tell me that, Miss Susan.

"Why, dear father, you know very well that when Master George Arnot was so unluckily obstinate about the affair of the water-course, and would go to law with you, and swore that instead of marrying William, poor Mary should be married to the rich maltster old Jacob Giles, William, who had loved Mary ever since they were children together, could not bear to stay in the country, and went off to my uncle, forbidding me ever to mention her name in a letter; and,—" "Well! well!" rejoined the father, somewhat softened, "but he need not have turned puppy and coxcomb because he was crossed in love. Pshaw!" added the good farmer, giving a mighty tug with his paddle at a tough mullein which happened to stand in his way, "I was crossed in love myself, in my young days, but I did not run off and turn

tailor. I made up plump to another wench—your poor mother, Susan, that's dead and gone—and carried her off like a man; married her in a month, girl; and that's what Will should have done. I'm afear'd we shall find him a sad jackanapes. Jem Hathaway, the gauger, told me last market-day that he saw him one Sunday in the what-dye-call't—the Park there, covered with rings, and gold chains, and fine velvets—all green and gold, like our great peacock. Well! we shall soon see. He comes to-night, you say? 'Tis not above six o'clock by the sun, and the Wantage coach don't come in till seven. Even if they lend him a horse and cart at the Nag's Head, he can't be here these two hours. So I shall just see the ten acre field cleared, and be home time enough to shake him by the hand if he comes like a man, or to kick him out of doors if he looks like a dandy." And off strode the stout yeoman in his clouted shoes, his leather gaiters, and smockfrock, and a beard (it was Friday) of six days' growth; looking altogether prodigiously like a man who would keep his word.

Susan, on her part, continued to thread the narrow winding lanes that led towards Wantage; walking leisurely along, and forming as she went, half unconsciously, a nosegay of the wild flowers of the season; the delicate hare-bell, the lingering wood-vetch, the blue scabious, the heaths which clustered on the bank, the tall graceful lilac campanula, the snowy bells of the bindweed, the latest briar-rose, and that species of clematis, which, perhaps, because it generally indicates the neighbourhood of houses, has won for itself the pretty name of the traveller's joy, whilst that loveliest of wild flowers, whose name is now sentimentalised out of prettiness, the intensely blue forget-me-not, was there in rich profusion.

Susan herself was not unlike her posy; sweet and delicate, and full of a certain pastoral grace. Her light and airy figure suited well with a fair mild countenance, breaking into blushes and smiles when she spoke, and set off by bright ringlets of golden hair, parted on her white forehead, and hanging in long curls on her finely-rounded cheeks. Always neat but never fine, gentle, cheerful, and modest, it would be difficult to find a prettier specimen of an English farmer's daughter than Susan Howe. But just now the little damsel wore a look of care not usual to her fair and tranquil features; she seemed, as she was, full of trouble.

"Poor William!" so ran her thoughts, "my father would not even listen to his last letter because it poisoned him with musk. I wonder that William can like that disagreeable smell. I and he expects him to come down on the top of the coach, instead of which, he says that he means to purchase a—a—(even in her thoughts poor Susan could not master the word, and was obliged to have recourse to the musk-scented billet) britschka—ay, that's it!—or a droschky; I wonder what sort of things they are—and that he only visits us *en passant* in a tour, for which, town being so empty, and business slack, his employer has given him leave, and in which he is to be accompanied by his friend Monsieur Victor—Victor—I can't make out his other name—an eminent perfumer who lives next door. To think of bringing a Frenchman here, remembering how my father hates the whole nation! Oh dear, dear! And yet I know William. I know why he went, and I do believe, in spite of a little finery and foolishness, and of all the britschkas, and droschkies, and Victors, into the bargain, that he'll be glad to get home again. No place like home! Even in these silly notes that feeling is always at the bottom. Did not I hear a

carriage before me? Yes!—no!—I can't tell. One takes every thing for the sound of wheels when one is expecting a dear friend!—And if we can but get him to look, as he used to look, and to be what he used to be, he won't leave us again for all the fine shops in Regent Street, or all the britschkas and droschkies in Christendom. My father is getting old now, and William ought to stay at home," thought the affectionate sister; "and I firmly believe that what he ought to do, he will do. Besides which—surely there *is* a carriage now." Just as Susan arrived at this point of her cogitations, that sound which had haunted her imagination all the afternoon, the sound of wheels rapidly advancing, became more and more audible, and was suddenly succeeded by a tremendous crash, mixed with men's voices—one of them her brother's—venting in two languages (for Monsieur Victor, whatever might be his proficiency in English, had recourse in this emergency to his native tongue) the different ejaculations of anger and astonishment which are pretty sure to accompany an overset: and on turning a corner of the lane, Susan caught her first sight of the britschka or droschky, whichever it might be, that had so much puzzled her simple apprehension, in the shape of a heavy-looking open carriage garnished with head and apron, lying prostrate against a gate-post, of which the wheels had fallen foul. Her brother was fully occupied in disengaging the horses from the traces, in reprimanding his companion for his bad driving, which he declared had occasioned the accident, and in directing him to go for assistance to a cottage half a mile back on the road to Wantage, whilst he himself intimated his intention of proceeding for more help to the Farm; and the obedient Frenchman—who, notwithstanding the derangement which his coëffure might naturally be expected to have experienced in his tumble, looked, Susan thought, as if his hair were put in paper every night and pomatumed every morning, and as if his whole dapper person were saturated with his own finest essences, a sort of travelling perfumer's shop, a peripatetic pouncet-box—walked off in the direction indicated, with an air of habitual submission, which showed pretty plainly that, whether as proprietor of the unlucky britschka, or from his own force of character, William was considered as the principal director of the present expedition.

Having sent his comrade off, William Howe, leaving his steeds quietly browsing by the wayside, bent his steps towards home. Susan advanced rapidly to meet him; and in a few seconds the brother and sister were in each other's arms; and, after most affectionate greetings, they sat down by mutual consent upon a piece of felled timber which lay upon the bank—the lane on one side being bounded by an old coppice—and began to ask each other the thousand questions so interesting to the children of one house who have been long parted.

Seldom surely has the rough and rugged bark of an unhewed elm had the honour of supporting so perfect an exquisite. Jem Hathaway, the exciseman, had in nothing exaggerated the magnificence of our young Londoner. From shoes which looked as if they had come from Paris in the ambassador's bag, to the curled head and the whiskered and mustachio'd countenance, (for the hat which should have been the crown of the finery was wanting—probably in consequence of the recent overturn,) from top to toe he looked fit for a ball at Almack's, or a fete at Bridgewater House; and, oh! how unseated to the old-fashioned homestead at Rutherford West! His lower appointments, hose and trousers, were of the finest

woven silk; his coat was claret colour, of the latest cut; his waistcoat—talk of the great peacock, *he* would have seemed dingy and dusky beside such a splendour of colour!—his waistcoat literally dazzled poor Susan's eyes; and his rings, and chains, and studs, and brooches, seemed to the wondering girl almost sufficient to stock a jeweller's shop.

In spite of all this nonsense, it was clear to her from every look and word that she was not mistaken in believing William unchanged in mind and disposition, and that there was a warm and a kind heart beating under the finery. Moreover, she felt that if the unseemly magnificence could once be thrown aside, the whiskers and mustachios cleared away, and his fine manly person reinstated in the rustic costume in which she had been accustomed to see him, her brother would *then* appear greatly improved in face and figure, taller, more vigorous, and with an expression of intelligence and frankness delightful to behold. But how to get quit of the finery, and the Frenchman, and the britschka? Or how reconcile her father to iniquities so far surpassing even the smell of musk?

William, on his part, regarded his sister with unqualified admiration. He had left a laughing blooming girl, he found a delicate and lovely young woman, all the more lovely for the tears that mingled with her smiles, true tokens of a most pure affection.

"And you really are glad to see me, Susy? And my father is well? And here is the old place, looking just as it used to do; house, and ricks, and barnyard, not quite in sight, but one feels that one shall see them at the next turning—the great coppice right opposite, looking thicker and greener than ever! how often we have gone nutting in that coppice!—the tall holly at the gate, with the woodbine climbing up, and twisting its sweet garlands round the very topmost spray like a coronet;—many a time and often have I climbed the holly to twine the flaunting wreath round your straw-bonnet, Miss Susy! And here, on the other side of the hedge, is the very field where Hector and Harebell ran their famous course, and gave their hare fifty turns before they killed her, without ever letting her get out of the stubble. Those were pleasant days, Susan, after all!"

"Happy days, dear William!"

"And we shall go nutting again, shall we not?"

"Surely, dear brother! Only"—— And

Susan suddenly stopped.

"Only what, Miss Susy?'

"Only I don't see how you can possibly go into the copse in this dress. Think how the brambles would prick and tear, and how that chain would catch in the hazel stems! and as to climbing the holly-tree in that fine tight coat, or beating the stubbles for a hare in those delicate thin shoes, why the thing is out of the question. And I really don't believe," continued Susan, finding it easier to go on than to begin, "I really don't believe that either Hector or Harebell would know you if they saw you so decked out."

William laughed outright

"I don't mean to go coursing in these shoes, I assure you, Susy. This is an evening dress. I have a shooting-jacket and all thereunto belonging in the britschka,

which will not puzzle either Harebell or Hector, because it's just what they have been used to see me wear."

"Put it on, then, I beseech you?" exclaimed Susy; "put it on directly!"

"Why, I am not going coursing this evening."

"No—but my father!—Oh, dear William! if you did but know how he hates finery, and foreigners, and whiskers, and britschkas! Oh, dear William, send off the French gentleman and the outlandish carriage—run into the coppice and put on the shooting-dress!"

"Oh, Susan!" began William; but Susan having once summoned up courage sufficient to put her remonstrances into words, followed up the attack with an earnestness that did not admit a moment's interruption.

"My father hates finery even more than Harebell or Hector would do. You know his country notions, dear William; and I think that latterly he has hated everything that looks Londonish and new-fangled worse than ever. We are old-fashioned people at Rutherford. There's your pretty old friend Mary Amott can't abide gewgaws any more than my father."

"Mary Arnott! You mean Mrs. Giles. What do I care for her likes and dislikes?" exclaimed William, haughtily.

"I mean Mary Arnott, and not Mrs. Giles, and you do care for her likes and dislikes a great deal," replied his sister, with some archness. "Poor Mary, when the week before that fixed for the wedding arrived, felt that she *could* not marry Master Jacob Giles; so she found an opportunity of speaking to him alone, and told him the truth. I even believe, although I have no warrant for saying so, that she confessed she could not love him because she loved another. Master Giles behaved like a wise man, and told her father that it would be very wrong to force her inclinations. He behaved kindly as well as wisely, for he endeavoured to reconcile all parties, and put matters in train for the wedding that had hindered his. This at that time Master Arnott would not hear of, and therefore we did not tell you that the marriage which you took for granted had gone off. Till about three months ago, that odious lawsuit was in full action, and Master Arnott as violently set against my father as ever. Then, however, he was taken ill, and, upon his deathbed, he sent for his old friend, begged his pardon, and appointed him guardian to Mary. And there she is at home—for she would not come to meet you—but there she is, hoping to find you just what you were when you went away, and hating Frenchmen, and britschkas, and finery, and the smell of musk, just as if she were my father's daughter in good earnest. And now, dear William, I know what has been passing in your mind, quite as well as if hearts were peep-shows, and one could see to the bottom of them at the rate of a penny a look. I know that you went away for love of Mary, and flung yourself into the finery of London to try to get rid of the thought of her, and came down with all this nonsense of britschkas, and whiskers, and waistcoats, and rings, just to show her what a beau she had lost in losing you—Did not you, now? Well! don't stand squeezing my hand, but go and meet your French friend, who has got a man, I see, to help to pick up the fallen equipage. Go and get rid of him," quoth Susan.

"How can I?" exclaimed William, in laughing perplexity.

"Give him the britschka!" responded his sister, "and send them off together as fast as may be. That will be a magnificent farewell. And then take your portmanteau into the copse, and change all this trumpery for the shooting-jacket and its belongings; and then come back and let me trim these whiskers as closely as scissors can trim them, and then we'll go to the farm, to gladden the hearts of Harebell, Hector, my dear father, and—somebody else; and it will not be that somebody's fault if ever you go to London again, or get into a britschka, or put on a chain, or a ring, or write with blue ink upon pink paper, as long as you live. Now go and dismiss the Frenchman," added Susan, laughing, "and well walk home together the happiest brother and sister in Christendom."