

## THE VILLAGE BELLE.

[The following, which is from Miss Mitford's *Village Sketches*, is probably one of the best productions, that ever flowed from her gifted pen.]

I pique myself on knowing by sight, and by name, almost every man and boy, in our parish, from eight years old to eighty—I cannot say quite so much for the women. They—the elder of them at least—are more within doors, more

hidden. One does not meet them in the fields and highways: their duties are close house-keepers, and live under cover. The girls, to be sure, are often enough in sight, "true creatures of the element" basking in the sun, racing in the wind, rolling in the dust, dabbling in the water, hardier, dirtier, noisier, more sturdier defiers of heat, and cold, and wet, than boys themselves. One sees them quite often enough to know them; but then the little elves alter so much at every step of their approach to womanhood, that recognition becomes difficult, if not impossible. It is not merely growing, boys grow;—it is positive, perplexing and perpetual change: a butterfly has not undergone more transmigrations in its progress through life, than a village belle in her arrival at the age of seventeen.

The first appearance of the little lass is something after the manner of a caterpillar, crawling and creeping upon the grass, set down to roll by some tired little nurse or an elder sister, or mother, with her hands full. There it lies—a fat, boneless, rosy piece of health, aspiring to the accomplishments of walking and talking; stretching its chubby limbs; scrambling and sprawling; laughing and roaring; there it sits, in all the dignity of the baby, adorned in a pink-checked frock, a blue spotted pinafore and a little white cap, tolerably clean and quite whole. One is forced to ask if it be boy or girl; for these hardy country rogues are all alike, open eyed, and weatherstained, and nothing fearing. There is no more mark of the sex in the countenance than in the dress.

In the next stage, dirt-encrusted enough to pass for the chrysalis, if it were not so very unquiet, the gender remains equally uncertain. It is a fine stout, curly-pated creature, of three or four, playing and rolling about, amongst grass or mud all day long; shouting, jumping, screeching—the happiest, compound of noise and idleness, rage and rebellion, that ever trod the earth. Then comes a sunburnt gipsy of six, beginning to grow tall and thin, and to find the cares of the world gathering about her; with a pitcher in one hand, a mop in the other, an old straw bonnet of ambiguous shape, half hiding her tangled hair; a tattered stuff petticoat, once green, hanging below an equally tattered cotton frock, once purple; her longing eyes fixed on a game of baseball at the corner of the green, till she reaches the cottage door, flings down the mop and pitcher, and darts off to her companions, quite regardless of the storm of scolding with which the mother follows her runaway steps.

So the world wags till ten; then the little damsel gets admission to the charity school and trips muncingly thither every morning, dressed in the old fashioned blue gown and white cap, and tippet, and bib and apron of that primitive institution, looking as demure as a Nun, and tidy; her thoughts fixed on button holes, and spelling books—these ensigns of promotion; despising dirt and baseball and all their joys.

Then at twelve the little lass comes home again; uncapped, untipped, unschooled; brown as a berry, wild as a colt, busy as a bee—working in the fields, digging in the garden, frying rashers, boiling potatoes, shelling beans, darning stockings, nursing children, feeding pigs;—all these employments varied by occasional fits of romping and flirting, and idle play, according as the nascent coquetry, or the lurking love of sport, happens to preponderate; merry, and pretty, and good with all her little faults. It would be well if a country girl could stand at thirteen. Then she is charming. But the clock will move forward, and at fourteen she gets a surprise in a neighboring town; and her next appearance is in the perfection of the butterfly state; fluttering, glittering, inconstant, vain,—gayest and gaudiest insect that ever skimmed over a village green. And this is the true progress of a rustic beauty, the average lot of our country girls; so they spring up, flourish, change and disappear. Some indeed marry and fix amongst us, and then ensues another set of changes, rather more gradual, perhaps, but quite as sure, till gray hairs, wrinkles, and linsey-woolsey, wind up the picture.

All this is beside the purpose. If woman be a mutable creature, man is not. The wearers of the smock frocks, in spite of the sameness of the uniform, are almost as easily distinguished by an interested eye, as a flock of sheep by the shepherd, or a pack of hounds by the huntsman: or to come to a less affronting similes, the members of the House of Commons by the Speaker, or the gentlemen of the bar by the Lord Chief Justice. There is very little change in them from early boyhood. "The child is father to the man" in more senses than one. There is a constancy about them, they keep the same faces however ugly; the same habits however strange; the same fashions however unfashionable; they are in nothing new fangled.—Tom Cooper, for instance, man and boy, is and has been addicted to posies,—from the first polyanthus to the last China rose, he has always a nosegay in his button hole; George Simmons may be known a mile off, by an eternal red waistcoat; Jem Tanner, summer and winter, by the smartest of all smart straw hats; and Joel Brent, from the day that he left off petticoats, has always, in every dress and every situation looked like a study for a painter,—no mistaking him.