

Calendar of the London Seasons

By

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(L. E. L.)

From

The New Monthly Magazine,

Vol 40, 1834

Compiled

by

Peter J. Bolton

THE
NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

CALENDAR OF THE LONDON SEASONS.

JANUARY.—Philosophers are moral, and poets are picturesque about the country. Sheridan Knowles, as the climax to the merits of his charming Julia, makes her declare to her lover, "Who weds with me must lead a country life." From the first shop in Piccadilly to the last on Ludgate-hill, "the farther-looking hope" that hovers over the counter is a dream of some rural retirement. I never heard a naval or military man speak of the future but as to be passed in some dwelling which held out the delights of growing their own vegetables and killing their own mutton. It has never been my fortune to meet with any individual who deliberately planned an existence to be passed actually in London. "The vision and the faculty divine" of imagining how your fortune is to be spent when acquired, always goes off the stones. It is an unpleasant thing to differ in opinion with the rest of one's species—it is making a sort of North Pole of one's own, and then setting out in search of it. Still I own that I indulge not in these rural anticipations; I look upon London as the very type of injured innocence and unappreciated excellence. I never wish to go farther than a hackney-coach can take me; I desire nothing better than pavement beneath my feet. When I wish

"Oh that some home like this for me would smile!"

I am looking at a good house with a street before and a street behind, and these streets very decidedly in London. I am a cockney, heart and soul, in every thing but "that bitter boon my birth." I trust, however, in this enlightened age, I shall not be reproached for the fault of my parents; at least I can say to our Metropolis,

"With thee were the dreams of my earliest love,
Every thought of my reason was thine."

I only know one gentleman with whom town is as it is with myself—at once a principle and a passion; but, alas! there is little integrity in this world; he not only avowed a predilection for Paris, but once said something about liking a villa at Harrow. I felt at once he was not capable of my intense, unalterable, and undivided attachment. I never in my life looked over with any interest any map but the map of London. It has always been

"The only place I coveted
In all the world so wide."

At the same time I beg leave to state that I have a taste for the poetical, and an eye for the picturesque; but I contend that both are to be found in their perfection in London. Indeed, I hold that people in town

alone appreciate the country; or rather, that London is the only place where the beauties of the country are really enjoyed.

A calendar of the London months comprises every variety of human pleasure—if we can but get at them. I forewarn my readers, however, that mine is a moderate scale. I shall not venture from the commonplace of the possible into the cloudland of the desirable. Wordsworth says,

“ Pleasures newly found are sweet,
When they lie about our feet.”

The moral of which I deduce to be, the charm of easy attainment. I shall only take a little from each season. I own the month, at the beginning, has as little, or rather less, to be said in its favour than any of the twelve. I like to be candid in my admissions—it is so very disarming; you forestall the objection which you admit—at least your adversary has scarcely the heart to push to its utmost the advantage which you so meekly confess. Still January has its good points. The weather is cold, I allow, but it is cold everywhere; and have we not a comfortable thick fog to keep us warm? Sancho said, “Blessed be the man who invented sleep; it covers all over as with a mantle.” May not the same encomium be passed on fog? First, among the pleasures to which it is my agreeable task to draw attention, is that of not getting up in the morning. In the country, early rising is a duty; in town, it is a fault. Ah! I appeal to all who have any sensibility—for themselves—how delightful it is to be called in the morning, yet not to obey that call. It combines two of the greatest enjoyments of which our nature is susceptible—obstinacy and indolence. “Your early risers know not what they lose.” A London day requires to be well aired before it is ventured into. If an east wind and a frost, I recommend the fireside; you can stir it by way of exercise. I hate one of those clear bright mornings, when the sun looks out coldly and mockingly, like wit sharpening at your expense; when you feel your very heart shrivelled within you, and think with respect of your ancestors, who rode and walked in black velvet masks. Then your feelings are so often hurt. Some friend, with a constitution like that of China, which has lasted from the time of Confucius to the present dynasty, catches you just as you are hastily turning some exposed corner, and stops you with the wind in your face to remark, “What beautiful weather for the time of year!” This is, as the author of *Crotchet Castle* remarks of giving you sandwiches when you expect supper, adding insult to injury. No,—on such a day stay at home, and you cannot do better than read the just mentioned little volume, whose wit is as cutting as the east wind which you will escape, and a great deal more agreeable. But there are some “Eolian influences” even on this month—soft, mild mornings, with just damp enough to release the hair from its first stiff curl into a glossy drooping, infinitely more becoming. Talk of flower-gardens, views from the tops of hills—which, remember, you have first to walk up—just look at the shops now, like the clan of Lochiel,

“ All plaided and plumed in their winter array!”

What taste in the arrangement of the floating gauzes and the draped silks! What an eye to colour! A painter might envy the bold and rich contrast between that scarlet cashmere and that emerald-green velvet. But it is in the pastry-cook's that we must look just now for the

triumph of art. There the twelfth-cakes extend "their white expanse of mimic snow," fit trophies for winter. I admire the national feeling that inspired their decorations; a little crowd are growing patriotic about yonder window. In the centre is a huge cake iced *couleur de rose*; all the devices are nautical, and it is surrounded with a border of shells which might puzzle a conchologist, but serve to show what a prodigality of invention there is in the most ordinary productions. In the centre is a cannon, and against it there is leaning a youth in a blue jacket and black handkerchief—the beau ideale of our nation's beau ideale—"a true British sailor." A little beyond is a fruiterer's shop. I prefer a fruiterer's in winter to any other time; it most excites my imagination. There are the oranges and the Lisbon grapes, associate with "summer soft skies." Spanish chestnuts, which bring to mind the stately trees where they grew, and all the wild tales of muleteers, guitars, and moonlight, which last seems made on purpose for Spain; but, of all, commend me to those Eastern treasures—dates. I never see one of those slender straw baskets filled with "the desert fruit" without losing myself in a delicious remembrance of those "Arabian Nights" which made so many a former day too short. I am no great believer in the superior happiness of childhood—it has its troubles. I remember a little Indian girl of some three years old, who was already forced to look back with

"That regret which haunts our riper years,"

on some occasion of juvenile delinquency, when she was condemned to the ordinary punishment of "being put in the corner." "Ah!" exclaimed the poor little thing, her large black eyes—larger even than usual with the big tears swelling in them, there only being a little pride to be gulped down before they fell—"Ah! there were no corners in Calcutta." If, even at three years old, we turn to the pleasures of memory, the less that is asserted about the felicity of childhood, the less there will be to dispute. Still it is the period when the Arabian Nights were first read, and that is enough to make up for a horde of catechisms of history, mythology, botany, &c., almost for the multiplication-table itself. Another attraction—one, too, whose

"Coming events cast their shadows before,"

in the shape of large black and red letters, gigantic in themselves, and gigantic in their promises—I mean play-bills. I am passionately fond of the theatre; and in spite of the present adoption of "Jeremiah's lamentations" on the "decline of the drama," there are a great multitude, to use an established phrase, "who will enter into my feelings." I am afraid that this said drama, like every thing else in the present time, must lay aside something of its former kingly pomp. The crown and sceptre in real life are consigned to the Tower, and I fear in the theatre they must be consigned to the treasury, kept by the sword with which Kean acted Richard III., "glorious memorials of the royal past." No more will

"Gorgeous tragedy, in sceptred pall, come sweeping by."

But I believe that the sphere of action will be made more intense by its wider range; there will always be passion, crime, and sorrow enough in the human heart for tragic materials. But I was going to speak of the pantomimes—those visions of fairy-land—those legacies left us by

the genii of old. Talk of travelling, who needs to travel while Stanfield and Grieve are greater than Mahomet, for they bring the mountain to us. I have seen the Falls of Niagara—I have looked on the Pyramids of Egypt—I am acquainted with old London Bridge. Take your children to the play by all means; they will go through a whole course of geography, and useful knowledge is the mania of to-day. “What a delicious life,” I heard the greatest author that we have remark, “is the existence of Harlequin and Columbine; it is the ideal of youth, liberty and love—dancing over the earth with those buoyant spirits only known to the young—their gaiety breaking out in a thousand fantastic pranks—perpetually changing the scene—beautiful and beloved—

‘Fate could not weave more silken web.’ ”

He spoke only in badinage; they are far too well off to be comfortable. It is an old belief of mine, and one which all my experience confirms, that we enjoy no pleasure so much as we do tormenting ourselves. I believe this to be the secret of half the monastic penances.

As I sat out with being candid, I must now confess to the only want at the close of the London winter; snow-drops cannot be enjoyed in their full perfection. That we dwellers in town have the most beautiful as well as the greatest delight in flowers, I intend proving during the next season. But snow-drops I must give up; they are the only flowers that will not bear being gathered, and as to those in pots, I have a bad opinion of any one’s principles who could consign them to those “earthy dungeons.” No, there is but one place in the world for snow-drops—an old avenue—whose leafless boughs show the nests of the rooks above, and above them again the grey sky. Let the ground below be covered with those white and fragile heads, which droop so fair and so cold. Holier steps than yours have, ages ago, pressed down those delicate stalks; for it is well known that snow-drops were planted in profusion in the gardens of the old monasteries—*Les extrêmes touchent*; and from

“The vestal flower which grew
Beneath the vestal’s eye,”

I must go on to “annals writ upon the crimson rose;” and here is debateable ground. Does St. Valentine belong to this season or the next? Poetry connects the “gentle saint” with spring. The Almanac decides that his anniversary belongs to winter. I, out of compliment to Shakspeare, who avers, that “all is well that ends well,” shall close my winter manifesto with St. Valentine. I fear, however, little remains of his ancient honours, save a laugh. Heavens! the huge hearts, stuck through with arrows, spitted ready for roasting; the red and round cupids, the over-fed doves, with which the windows now abound; and then the verses, *dieu merci!*—fires are not yet left off, so they can be burnt with all possible dispatch. Is there anything in Bath paper adverse to the expression of the tender passion? Every now and then the newspapers give us specimens of love-letters, almost too good to be true; and yet they are equally genuine and general. Every one has some pet project—mine is to publish “A Complete Love-letter Writer,” suited to ninety-nine occasions—the hundredth people may manage for themselves. In the meantime, I beg to submit a specimen. I have taken up the French writer’s assertion, that love is an “*égoïsme*

en deux personnes.” Pattern love-letter—“I—I—I—you—you—you ; you—you—you—I—I—I,” garnished with loves and doves *ad libitum*.

SPRING—“When conscious beauty puts on all her charms.” I really do not understand what people can want who do not find all they wish in London just now. Do you like music?—the *prima donna* of all Europe is engaged after Easter. I always consider it an event in my life having seen Pasta, with her inspired eyes and classic brow ; she gives the idea of a Grecian statue, stepped from its pedestal and animated with the fire of genius. A clever writer in a contemporary reproaches her as only personifying the “haggard queen.” Now, I feel, from the different sensations I experience, how different are the characters that she embodies. Look at the superb defiance of Fate itself with which she approaches the tomb of Ninus, as the hitherto all-triumphant Semiramide. In Anna Boleyn how exquisite are the transitions from, first, the blank look of idiocy, so terribly true ; then the innocent and engaging expression of childhood, so confident in its own happiness ; and at last, the flash of reason which brings frenzy with it. Who that has heard it, but has thrilled at that most touching reproach wrung from the stricken soul of love, the “io” of her Medea ;—but the working up of the scene is equal to the great effect. There is true knowledge of woman’s heart in the timidity with which she approaches the beloved Greek. No one ever deeply loved without thinking themselves unworthy of their idol ; and Medea, the royal, the beautiful, and the gifted, is meek and subdued in the presence of Jason. Gradually, the recollection of her sacrifices and her wrongs rouse her to a juster sense of her own claims ; she knows the vast wealth of her love, and feels that such a heart might well be the world to that recreant lover. I confess, I speak of her only as an actress ; I am incompetent to judge of her as a singer ; I only like the most simple melody, and require to hear an air often ; I ask association from music ; I confess a partiality to barrel organs, and clarionets, and ballads, and other “street harmonics.” That composer felt as well as knew his science, who always asked of any new air, “If it would grind well?”

Moore says, that, in the Malay language, the same word expresses woman and flowers ; if so, it is the prettiest compliment ever paid the sex, not that any one of them will be grateful for it, for who cares for a general compliment more than a general lover. Just, however, at this season, the Malay tongue might be used in London. How many sweet, bright, and lovely faces pass us by ! Most women look well in their bonnets ; and as for the other sort of flowers, we have them in profusion and perfection—such exquisite violets, such delicate lilies of the valley, such a rainbow world of hyacinths as now fill the rooms with perfume. How often at the end of morning with the fashionable world—afternoon with the more quiet part of the community—and evening with the very respectable indeed—a young cavalier may be seen curbing a horse “impatient of the rein,” at the nursery-grounds of the King’s Road, till a bouquet of the most fragrant exotics is brought out. It does not ask much imagination to read a history of sighs, smiles, and blushes on every leaf. But I have less to say for the spring than for any other season ; it has a name, which is tantamount to everything in this world—all know the pretensions of a London spring.

SUMMER.—Nothing can be so pleasant as London in the summer. It

is so cool, putting Piccadilly, from two till five, out of the question : there is always shade on one side or other of the street, a shade which you doubly enjoy, on the principle of contrast. It is satisfactory to think how hot the people must be opposite : then, though I do not eat ice myself, I can suppose other people doing it. If they do, an eastern poet might gain new ideas about coolness and fragrance, while enjoying the coloured coldnesses at Grange's. Towards the close, flowers begin to pass away ; you are not met at every second step in Regent's Street by a bunch of moss-roses—a little faded, it is true, allegories by the way of our pleasures, but sweet notwithstanding. Dark-eyed pinks no longer heap the stands in such profusion ; but then fruit is come in, such fruit as London only can furnish. I confess that I have no simple and natural tastes about gathering it myself. My experiences in that way have been unfortunate. I once picked some strawberries, and disturbed a whole colony of frogs ; I once gathered a plum, and was stung by a wasp ; and my latest experience regarded a peach, which hung—

"With rosy cheek turn'd to the sun
Upon a southern wall."

There is an old proverb which says, "Tell me your company, and I will tell you yourself." By this rule the peach would be severely judged, for its associates were earwigs. I can't say, for I made no trial of its merits : the sight of its friends were enough for me. I pass over a horde of other miseries, such as stooping in the sun, thorns, dirt, &c., and will only observe, that fruit never looks to such an advantage as it does on china, whether Dresden, Sevres, or even Worcester. There are two seasons when Covent-garden will more especially reward a visit,—at the beginning of summer and at the close. Flora holds her court in the first instance, and Pomona in the second. Pass along the centre arcade, and it is lined with trophies of the parterre or of the orchard, and you may look upon the early roses, and grow sentimental about

"The blush that ever haunted early love,"

or become unsophisticated, and go back to the innocent enjoyments of your childhood while gazing on the crimson-sided apples. I like, too, Hungerford Market ; it gives one the idea of a Dutch picture. People wear mere bargaining faces ; fruit and flowers have their price, but fish were sent into the world, at least, into the market, to be cheapened. Everybody beats down the price of a fresh pair of soles, or a fine turbot. It is just the sort of place for a new edition of the old anecdote of a well-known legal peer, who, feeling the necessity of reform among fishmongers, and retrenchment in their bills, determined on "shaming the rogues." He took his station at the dinner-table in all the triumph of a good bargain, that ovation of daily life, when "there was a place where the turbot was not." Instead of that, he met his lady's eyes, triumphant in her turn, with a consciousness of a good bargain also,—“My dear, fish was excessively dear to-day, and poor Mrs. So-and-so called in great distress, her fishmonger having disappointed her ; so I let her have the turbot for—” exactly one-half what her unfortunate husband had paid for it.

The moral of this story is,—we English people delight in a moral—not a moral to be deduced or inferred, but a nice, rounded, little moral.

in all the starch of set sentences, and placed just at the end,—the moral of this is, let no man think of buying bargains. Alas for the unfortunate woman whose husband delights in surprises and presents! If she has red hair, he brings her home pink ribbons: he buys a cap at the Bazaar or a bonnet in the Arcade,—not that I mean the least disrespect to those two very pretty places;—but certainly the crimsons and yellows, the blues and greens, which ornament the fabrics there exhibited, meant to decorate “the human face divine,”—to say nothing of size or shape,—do require a considerable degree of moral courage in the wearer. No, let a man venture on nothing but shawls and jewellery: in a Cashmere or a diamond necklace he cannot go far wrong.—By the by, Kensington Gardens are just now singularly beautiful: I do not mean the walk *par distinction*; for I am writing of the picturesque, not the social pleasures of London:—no; go among the old trees, whose depths of shade are as little known as the depths of the Black Forest. The fine old branches will close over your head; the caw of the rooks is heard in melancholy but musical monotony; while their flight ever and anon disturbs the quiet leaves, and lets in fantastic streaks of sunshine on the soft grass. From afar off comes the perpetual and deep voice of the huge city,—that human ocean, whose waves know not rest. After wandering through many a shadowy walk,—all darkly green, for there are no flowers,—you arrive at the square old palace—associate with William and Mary;—formal, staid, suiting the town portion of a period when “the tangles of Neera’s hair” were powdered, and “the silver-footed Thetises” wore high-heeled slippers. I like William. Placed all his life in the most difficult circumstances, he yet made the best of them; and he, at least, owed no gratitude to his father-in-law. But Mary;—it is treason to all her sex’s most kindly affections not to entertain an aversion to the most cold and thankless of children. Female patriotism is a thing utterly beyond my comprehension. Her father had been a kind father to her; and the claims even of a nation are, to a woman, little in comparison with those of home. The reader may or may not think so; he can turn the subject over in his mind while he pursues the dim and chestnut-shaded walk which brings him again to the Park. During this time the sun has been setting; the fine old trees stand still and solemn in the crimson air; the Park is empty; the smoke has rolled away, and rests, like a thunder-storm, over the distant buildings. A clear and softened atmosphere is immediately above you; a few light clouds are flushed with lights of fugitive red; a deep purple hue is upon the Serpentine, along which are floating, still as shadows, snowy as spirits, two or three white swans. They alone share with you the silence and the solitude to be found even in London.

AUTUMN.—London now must rely on its own resources. It is such a thing to have resources in yourself, as people say when they waste a little fortune in having their daughters taught music and drawing, though all experience shows,—in vain though, of course, as experience always does,—that the chances are that the piano will never be opened, nor the pencil touched, when the young lady has once passed the age of exhibition. Who does not remember Mrs. Elton and “her resources?” If they do not, we congratulate them: life has yet a pleasure in store; they have “Emma” to read. Now is the period for really seeing the streets: at other times, one’s own personal safety has to be

consulted. I confess there are two or three crossings that justify desperation; one rushes across, shut's one's eyes, and trusts in Providence—a method of proceeding I cannot recommend, it being more Mahometan than Christian. Of all vehicles, dread a cabriolet. Common people and carts have consciences; cabriolets have none. But now the lovers of the picturesque may indulge their tastes without risking their lives, as if they were ascending Mont Blanc, or traversing the desert, surrounded by Bedouin Arabs. First comes the early walk along Piccadilly. The week before has been wet; and through those light and graceful arches which open on the Park is seen a wide expanse of glittering green. On the other side is another arch, which I shall pass over with the slightest possible mention, it being much too heavy for these pages. The eye being glad to get away as soon as possible, wanders into the distance, and rests on the old towers of Westminster Abbey, shining through a golden haze, which hangs around it like the glory of past ages. There rises the most historical of cathedrals. Show us, in all Europe, a sanctuary keeping sacred so much noble dust.

Westminster Abbey is the architectural epic of England. It is beautiful now with the early sunshine of morning: it is as beautiful when the sky is pale and clear, just after sunset—a line of amber stretched across the west; and then, tall and shadowy, stands forth still more distinct the dark outline of those antique turrets. But they are most beautiful of all in the moonlight, when the blue and transparent sky has not a cloud, and the vast building looks as if the shadow of tradition rested on its large and stately proportions. The foreground, too, is full of poetry—an open sweep, silvered by the moonlight; while the lamps afar off—pale and spiritual—fires fed invisibly—are repeated on the water with a wavering and subdued light. The streets around so quiet, so solemn,—for the rest of life is, indeed, a solemn thing,—time itself seems to stand still in such a midnight.

But with the glad morning I began, and to that I return. Yet it was on such a one as I have been describing,—a soft, bright, autumnal morn, when the last glow of that rich season seems upon the air,—that I witnessed one of those affecting scenes which rise upon the memory oftener than its own more immediate regrets. Perhaps it is a benevolent provision of Nature that we remember more what touches than what pains us. We were loitering down the sunny side of the street, when suddenly the sound of bugles came upon the air, and a party of soldiers crossed our path, carrying the coffin of one of their comrades. The air played was that mournful Scotch melody, "The Land of the Leal." Both my companion and myself were young enough to follow the impulse of the moment, and it led us as far as Paddington Church, pursuing the small, sad procession, and the wail of that sorrowful music. We heard the service read, and waited till the volley was fired over the grave. I never saw that churchyard again till the other day. It is the most rural-looking one in all the metropolis. You approach it by a little green, and the gate is sheltered by one or two old trees. It is thickly peopled, if such an expression may be used to a city of the dead. "Ah, dear!" exclaimed the lady I was with to her husband; "do let me be buried here, it seems so comfortable—plenty of company; and it will be such a nice morning walk for you to come and weep over my grave!"

Hitherto my London sketches have been its Claude Lorraine views ; there are darker shades. A walk in November towards the more densely populated districts is like winding through a German story. Nothing can well be more gloomy than a November evening in the city ; and yet it has a strange, though saddening excitement. The air is heavy, as if that fine and subtle element were, by some strange process, becoming palpable. The shop-windows are dim, and the most familiar objects take unknown and strange shapes ; the lights have a red and sullen glare ; a hurrying multitude passes along ; vehicles and passengers jostle together ; there is neither rest nor quiet ; you speak, and hear not your own voice. There seems no such thing as sympathy or relaxation in the world ; it is given up wholly to business. The hardships and the labour of life oppress you with their visible presence. Pleasure changes into self-reproach. The atmosphere is weighed down by toiling days and anxious nights. The crowd jostle on ; they reckon not of each other ;—the careworn are always the careless. The great current of life flows through those restless streets, turbulent and unresting. There are no flowers on its troubled waters,—no sunshine on its banks ;—or to drop metaphor, there seems no place for the gentler affections, graces, and sentiments of existence. Fear is upon you, and around you. You turn to some side-street ; you seek to escape the tumult and the throng. You find yourself on one of the bridges. The scattered rays on each side, and the vapoury lamps, fling a faint and unnatural light on the dark arches which seem hung in air. Below is the river, gloomy, sepulchral,—a river of smoke. No purer element ever rolled in such “ darkness visible.” The dense mass of buildings lifts its shadowy outline on either side, crowded, confused, and heavy. Crime and misery rise uppermost on the mind. You feel what a weary wilderness is that whose moaning thunder comes perpetual on the ear. The black river is as Avernus, with hell upon its banks. I know not how it may affect others, such was the impression upon myself. I felt afraid, overwhelmed, and oppressed to the last degree of sadness. So much for fog, night, and November.

When I have been through those very streets of a morning, I have been full of interest, and curiosity, and historic association. Fashion has had to make the best of a bad bargain. She has retreated before the commercial interests. The Thames is wanted for the world : not for what is called the “ great world.” Wharfs have taken the place of the gardens. Still I must regret the noble dwellings of Henry and Elizabeth’s times ; the days of terraces and barges, when the court went by water to Greenwich, and the fine old houses in the Strand had pleasure-grounds sloping down to the river.

“ Mais il faut finir enfin,” as the Maréchal d’Albret’s porter said when he ate up the last lark of the dinner which his master had had for sixteen, and of which the said master, in a fit of ennui, had desired him to eat as much as he could by way of experiment. I know that I have not done justice to my subject. I feel it too strongly. Last, best test of attachment, I hope the blame will fall upon me, and comfort myself by thinking this tribute to the perfection of London will appear at the most fitting season. Month of conservatories in full beauty ; of milliners in full fashion ; month of the latest oysters and earliest roses, who but must appreciate London in April !

L. E. L.