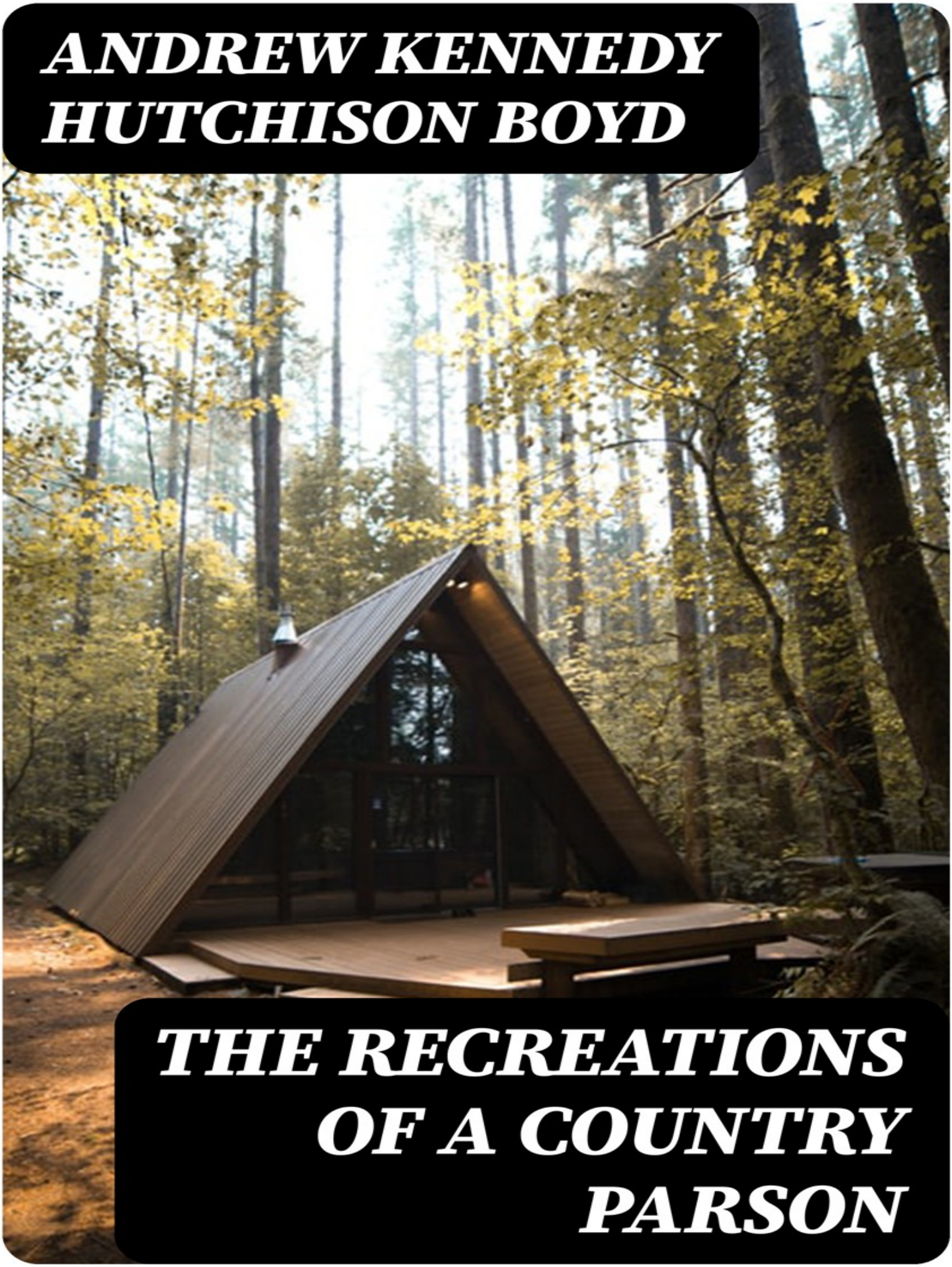
ANDREW KENNEDY HUTCHISON BOYD



THE RECREATIONS OF A COUNTRY PARSON

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CHAPTER I.

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CONCERNING THE PARSON'S CHOICE BETWEEN TOWN AND COUNTRY.

One very happy circumstance in a clergyman's lot, is that he is saved from painful perplexity as regards his choice of the scene in which he is to spend his days and years. I am sorry for the man who returns from Australia with a large fortune; and with no further end in life than to settle down somewhere and enjoy it. For in most cases he has no special tie to any particular place; and he must feel very much perplexed where to go. Should any person who may read this page cherish the purpose of leaving me a hundred thousand pounds to invest in a pretty little estate, I beg that he will at once abandon such a design. He would be doing me no kindness. I should be entirely bewildered in trying to make up my mind where I should purchase the property. I should be rent asunder by conflicting visions of rich English landscape, and heathery Scottish hills: of seaside breezes, and inland meadows: of horse-chestnut avenues, and dark

stern pine-woods. And after the estate had been bought, I should always be looking back and thinking I might have done better. So, on the whole, I would prefer that my reader should himself buy the estate, and bequeath it to me: and then I could soon persuade myself that it was the prettiest estate and the pleasantest neighbourhood in Britain.

Now, as a general rule, the Great Disposer says to the parson, Here is your home, here lies your work through life: go and reconcile your mind to it, and do your best in it. No doubt there are men in the Church whose genius, popularity, influence, or luck is such, that they have a bewildering variety of livings pressed upon them: but it is not so with ordinary folk; and certainly it was not so with me. I went where Providence bade me go, which was not where I had wished to go, and not where I had thought to go. Many who know me through the pages which make this and a preceding volume, have said, written, and printed, that I was specially cut out for a country parson, and specially adapted to relish a quiet country life. Not more, believe me, reader, than yourself. It is in every man who sets himself to it to attain the self-same characteristics. It is quite true I have these now: but, a few years since, never was mortal less like them. No cockney set down near Sydney Smith at Foston-le-Clay: no fish, suddenly withdrawn from its native stream: could feel more strange and cheerless than did I when I went to my beautiful country parish, where I have spent such happy days, and which I have come to love so much.

I have said that the parson is for the most part saved the labour of determining where he shall pitch his tent: his place

and his path in life are marked out for him. But he has his own special perplexity and labour: quite different from those of the man to whom the hundred thousand pounds to invest in land are bequeathed: still, as some perhaps would think, no less hard. His work is to reconcile his mind to the place where God has set him. Every mortal must, in many respects, face one of these two trials. There is all the world before you, where to choose; and then the struggle to make a decided choice with which you shall on reflection remain entirely satisfied. Or there is no choice at all: the Hand above gives you your place and your work; and then there is the struggle heartily and cheerfully to acquiesce in the decree as to which you were not consulted.

And this is not always an easy thing; though I am sure that the man who honestly and Christianly tries to do it, will never fail to succeed at last. How curiously people are set down in the Church; and indeed in all other callings whatsoever! You find men in the last places they would have chosen; in the last places for which you would say they are suited. You pass a pretty country church, with its parsonage hard-by embosomed in trees and bright with roses. Perhaps the parson of that church had set his heart on an entirely different kind of charge: perhaps he is a disappointed man, eager to get away, and (the very worst possible policy) trying for every vacancy of which he can hear. You think, as you pass by, and sit down on the churchyard wall, how happy you could be in so quiet and sweet a spot: well, if you are willing to do a thing, it is pleasant: but if you are struggling with a chain you cannot break, it is miserable. The pleasantest thing becomes painful, if it is felt as a

restraint. What can be cosier than the warm environment of sheet and blanket which encircles you in your snug bed? Yet if you awake during the night at some alarm of peril, and by a sudden effort try at once to shake yourself clear of these trammels, you will, for the half-minute before you succeed, feel that soft restraint as irksome as iron fetters. 'Let your will lead whither necessity would drive,' said Locke, 'and you will always preserve your liberty.' No doubt, it is wise advice; but how to do all that?

Well, it can be done: but it costs an effort. Great part of the work of the civilized and educated man consists of that which the savage, and even the uneducated man, would not regard as work at all. The things which cost the greatest effort may be done, perhaps, as you sit in an easy chair with your eyes shut. And such an effort is that of making up our mind to many things, both in our own lot, and in the lot of others. I mean not merely the intellectual effort to look at the success of other men and our own failure in such a way as that we shall be intellectually convinced that, we have no right to complain of either: I do not mean merely the labour to put things in the right point of view: but the moral effort to look fairly at the facts not in any way disguised,—not tricked out by some skilful art of putting things;—and yet to repress all wrong feeling;—all fretfulness, envy, jealousy, dislike, hatred. I do not mean, to persuade ourselves that the grapes are sour; but (far nobler surely) to be well aware that they are sweet, and yet be content that another should have them and not we. I mean the labour, when you have run in a race and been beaten, to resign your mind to the fact that you have been beaten, and to bear a kind feeling

towards the man who beat you. And this is labour, and hard labour; though very different from that physical exertion which the uncivilized man would understand by the word. Every one can understand that to carry a heavy portmanteau a mile is work. Not every one remembers that the owner of the portmanteau, as he walks on carrying nothing weightier than an umbrella, may be going through exertion much harder than that of the porter. Probably St. Paul never spent days of harder work in all his life, than the days he spent lying blind at Damascus, struggling to get free from the prejudices and convictions of all his past years, and resolving—on the course he would pursue in the years to come.

I know that in all professions and occupations to which men can devote themselves, there is such a thing as com petition: and wherever there is competition, there will be the temptation to envy, jealousy, and detraction, as regards a man's competitors: and so there will be the need of that labour and exertion which lie in resolutely trampling that temptation down. You are quite certain, rny friend, as you go on through life, to have to make up your mind to failure and disappointment on your own part, and to seeing other men preferred before you. When these tilings come, there are two ways of meeting them. One is, to hate and vilify those who surpass you, either in merit or in success: to detract from their merit and under-rate their success: or, if you must admit some merit, to bestow upon it very faint praise. Now, all this is natural enough; but assuredly it is neither a right nor a happy course to follow. The other and better way is, to fight these tendencies to the death: to struggle

against them, to pray against them: to resign yourself to God's good will: to admire and love the man who beats you. This course is the right one, and the happy one. I believe the greatest blessing God can send a man, is disappointment, rightly met and used. There is no more ennobling discipline: there is no discipline that results in a happier or kindlier temper of mind. And in honestly fighting against the evil impulses which have been mentioned, you will assuredly get help and strength to vanquish them. I have seen the plain features look beautiful, when man or woman was faithfully by God's grace resisting wrong feelings and tendencies, such as these. It is a noble end to attain, and it is well worth all the labour it costs, to resolutely be resigned, cheerful, and kind, when you feel a strong inclination to be discontented, moody, and bitter of heart. Well said a very wise mortal, 'Better is he that ruleth his spirit, than he that taketh a city.' And that ruling of the spirit which is needful to rightly meet disappointment, brings out the best and noblest qualities that can be found in man.

Sometimes, indeed, even in the parson's quiet life, he may know something of the first perplexity of which we have been thinking: the perplexity of the man who is struggling to make up his mind where he is to settle down for the remainder of life. And it is not long since such a perplexity came my way. For I had reached a spot in my onward path at which I must make a decided choice. I must go either to the right or the left: for, as Goldsmith has remarked with great force, when the road you are pursuing parts into several roads, you must be careful to follow only

one. And I had to decide between country and town. I had to resolve whether I was to remain in that quiet cure of souls about which I formerly told you; or go into the hard work and hurry of a large parish in a certain great city.

I had been for more than five years in that sweet country place: it seemed a very long time as the days passed over. Even slow-growing ivy grew feet longer in that time, and climbing roses covered yards and yards of wall. And for very many months I thought that here I was to live and die, and never dreamt of change. Not indeed that my tastes were always such. At the beginning of that term of years, when I went down each Sunday morning to preach in the plain little church to a handful of quiet rustic people, I used to think of a grand edifice where once upon a time, at my first start in my profession, I had preached each afternoon for many months to a very large congregation of educated folk; and I used to wonder whether my old friends remembered and missed me. Once there was to me a fascination about that grand church, and all connected with it: now it is to me no more than it is to every one else, and I pass near it almost every day and hardly look at it. Other men have taken my old place in it, and had the like feelings, and got over them. Several of these men I never saw: how much I should like to shake each man's hand! But all these fancies were long, long ago: I was pleased to be a country parson, and to make the best of it. Friends, who have held like stations in life, have you not felt, now and then, a little waking up of old ideas and aspirations? All this, you thought, was not what you once had wished, and pictured to yourself. You vainly fancied, in your student days, that you might reach a more

eminent place and greater usefulness. I know, indeed, that even such as have gone very unwillingly to a little remote country parish, have come most heartily to enjoy its peaceful life: have grown fond of that, as they never thought to do. I do not mean that you need affectedly talk, after a few months there, as if you had lived in the country all your life, and as if your thoughts had from childhood run upon horses, turnips, and corn. But in sober earnest, as weeks pass over, you gain a great interest in little country cares; and you discover that you may be abundantly useful, and abundantly laborious, amid a small and simple population.

Yet sometimes, my clever friend, I know you sit down on a green bank, under the trees, and look at your little church. You think, of your companions and competitors in College days, filling distinguished places in life: and, more particularly, of this and that friend in your own calling, who preaches to as many people on one Sunday as you do in half a year. Fine fellows they were: and though you seldom meet now, you are sure they are faithful, laborious, able, and devoted ministers: God bless them all! You wonder how they can do so much work; and especially how they have confidence to preach to so large and intelligent congregations. For a certain timidity, and distrust of his own powers, grows upon the country parson. He is reaching the juster estimate of himself, indeed: yet there is something not desirable in the nervous dislike to preach in large churches and to cultivated people which is sure to come. And little things worry him, which would not worry a mind kept more upon the stretch. It is possible enough that

among the Cumberland hills, or in curacies like Sydney Smith's on Salisbury Plain, or wandering sadly by the shore of Shetland fiords, there may be men who had in them the makings of eminent preachers; but whose powers have never been called out, and are rusting sadly away: and in whom many petty cares are developing a pettiness of nature.

I have observed that in those advertisements which occasionally appear in certain newspapers, offering for sale the next presentation to some living in the Church, the advertiser, after pointing out the various advantages of the situation, frequently sums up by stating that the population of the parish is very small, and so the clergyman's duty very light. I always read such a statement with great displeasure. For it seems to imply, that a clergyman's great object is, to enjoy his benefice and do as little duty as possible in return for it. I suppose it need not be proved, that if such were truly the great object of any parson, he has no business to be in the Church at all. Failing health, or powers overdriven, may sometimes make even the parson whose heart is in his work desire a charge whose duty and responsibility are comparatively small: but I firmly believe that in the case of the great majority of clergymen, it is the interest and delight they feel in their work, and not its worldly emolument, that mainly attach them to their sacred profession: and thus that the more work they have to do (provided their strength be equal to it), the more desirable and interesting they hold their charge to be. And I believe that the earnest pastor, settled in some light and pleasant country charge, will oftentimes, even amid his simple enjoyment of that

pleasant life, think that perhaps he would be more in the path of duty, if, while the best years of his life are passing on, he were placed where he might serve his Master in a larger sphere.

And thinking now and then in this fashion, I was all of a sudden asked to undertake a charge such as would once have been my very ideal: and in that noble city where my work began, and so which has always been very dear. But I felt that everything was changed. Before these years of growing experience, I dare say I should not have feared to set myself even to work as hard; but now I doubted greatly whether I should prove equal to it. That time in the country had made me sadly lose confidence. And I thought it would be very painful and discouraging to go to preach to a large congregation, and to see it Sunday by Sunday growing less, as people got discontented and dropped away.

But happily, those on whom I leant for guidance and advice, were more hopeful than myself; and so I came away from my beautiful country parish. You know, my friends, who have passed through the like, the sorrow to look for the last time at each kind homely face: the sorrow to turn away from the little church where you have often preached to very small congregations: the sorrow to leave each tree you have planted, and the evergreens whose growth you have watched, year by year. Soon, you are in all the worry of what in Scotland we call a flitting: the house and all its belongings are turned upside down. The kindness of the people comes out with tenfold strength when they know how soon you are to part. And some, to whom you had tried to do little favours, and who had somewhat disappointed you by the

slight sense of them they had shown, now testify by their tears a hearty regard which you never can forget.

The Sunday comes when you enter your old pulpit for the last time. You had prepared your sermon in a room from which the carpet had been removed, and amid a general confusion and noise of packing. The church is crowded in a fashion never seen before. You go through the service, I think, with a sense of being somewhat stunned and bewildered. And in the closing sentences of your sermon, you say little of yourself; but in a few words, very hard to speak, you thank your old friends for their kindness to you through the years you have passed together; and you give them your parting advice, in some sentence which seems to contain the essence of all you meant to teach in all these Sundays; and you say farewell, farewell.

You are happy, indeed, if after all, though quitting your country parsonage, and turning over a new leaf in life, you have not to make a change so entire as that from country to town generally is: if, like me, you live in the most beautiful city in Britain: a city where country and town are blended together: where there are green gardens, fields, and trees: shady places into which you may turn from the glaring streets, into verdure as cool and quiet as ever, and where your little children can roll upon the grass, and string daisies as of old; streets, from every opening in which you look out upon blue hills and blue sea. No doubt, the work is very hard, and very constant; and each Sunday is a very exciting and exhausting day. You will understand, my friend, when you go to such a charge, what honour is due to those venerable men who have faithfully and efficiently done the

duty of the like for thirty or forty years. You will look at them with much interest: you will receive their kindly counsel with great respect. You will feel it somewhat trying and nervous work to ascend your pulpit; and to address men and women who in mental cultivation, and in things much more important, are more than equal to yourself. And as you walk down; always alone, to church each Sunday morning, you will very earnestly apply for strength and wisdom beyond your own, in a certain Quarter where they will never be sought in vain. Yet you will delight in all your duty: and you will thank God you feel that were your work in life to choose again, you would give yourself to the noblest task that can be undertaken by mortal, with a resolute purpose firmer a thousand times than even the enthusiastic preference of your early youth. The attention and sympathy with which your congregation will listen to your sermons, will be a constant encouragement and stimulus; and you will find friends so dear and true, that yon. will hope never to part from them while life remains. In such a life, indeed, these Essays, which never would have been begun had my duty been always such, must be written in little snatches of time: and perhaps a sharp critic could tell, from internal evidence, which of them have been written in the country and which in the town. I look up from the table at which I write: and the roses, honeysuckle, and the fuchsias, of a year since, are far away: through the window I discover lofty walls, whose colour inclines to black. Yet I have not regretted the day, and I do not believe I ever will regret the day, when I ceased to be a Country Parson.

CHAPTER II.

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CONCERNING DISAPPOINTMENT AND SUCCESS.

Russet woods of Autumn, here you are once more! I saw you, golden and brown, in the afternoon sunshine to-day. Crisp leaves were falling, as I went along the foot-path through the woods: crisp leaves lie upon the green graves in the churchyard, fallen from the ashes: and on the shrubbery walks, crisp leaves from the beeches, accumulated where the grass bounds the gravel, make a warm edging, irregular, but pleasant to see. It is not that one is 'tired of summer:' but there is something soothing and pleasing about the autumn days. There is a great clearness of the atmosphere sometimes; sometimes a subdued, gray light is diffused everywhere. In the country, there is often, on these afternoons, a remarkable stillness in the air, amid which you can hear a withering leaf rustling down. I will not think that the time of bare branches and brown grass is so very near as yet; Nature is indeed decaying, but now we have decay