

A village called "poor" in a "dry" valley; could any place have a more unpleasant name?

The Dry Valley!

"valley" because the place was shut in between mountains; "dry," because the stream, which had cut its way through the middle of the valley, was dry most of the year.

This was how the valley lies.

To the right stood a hill called "Rîpoasa." On the left were three other hills, called "Fatza," "Grofnitza," and "Alunish." Rîpoasa was rocky. Fatza was cultivated; the village stood on Grofnitza, while on Alunish lay the village graveyard among hazel and birch trees. Thus it lay to right and left, but the chief feature of the landscape stood at the bottom. Here rose the mountains--from there, came what did come.

The other side, beyond Rîpoasa was the Rapitza Valley--a much deeper valley than the Dry Valley, and so called because the Rapitza flowed through it. The Rapitza was a treacherous river, especially in the spring, and the stream in the Dry Valley was a branch of the Rapitza. In the spring, when the snow melted on the mountains, the Rapitza got angry and poured part of her fury into the branch that flowed through the Dry Valley, and the latter ceased to be "dry."

In a few hours the inhabitants of Saraceni were rather too rich in water. This occurred nearly every year. When the crops in the valley appeared to be most favourable, the Dry Valley belied its name and washed away all that lay in its path.

It would have been rather better if this invasion had lasted only a short time, but the water remained in the valley, and in many places formed refuges for the frog family. And instead of corn, osiers and interlacing willows grew by the side of its pools.

Was it any wonder that in consequence of this the people of Saraceni had become in time the most idle of men? He is a fool who sows where he cannot reap, or where he does not know whether he will be able to reap or not. The Fatza was a sandy spot; the corn grew a few inches high and the maize a yard; on Rîpoasa one could not grow blackberries even, for at the bottom the water spoilt the fruit. Where there is no hope of reward there is no incentive to work. Whoever works wants to earn, but the people of Saraceni had given up all thoughts of gain, and therefore no one felt inspired to work. Those who could afford it passed their time lying out of doors; those who could not, spent their day working in the neighbouring villages. When the winter came life was hard and bitter.

But whoever has got used to the bad does not think of better things; the people of Saraceni appeared to think that things could not be better than they were. Fish in the water, birds in the air, moles in the ground, and the people of Saraceni in poverty!

Saraceni? One can imagine what a village like Saraceni must have been; here a house, there a house--all alike. Hedges were superfluous, seeing there was nothing to enclose; the street was the whole village. It would have been absurd to put a chimney on the house--the smoke found its way out through the roof. There would have been no sense in putting plaster on the walls either, as that dropped off in time. Some of the buildings were made of bits of wood knocked together, a roof of straw mixed with hay, an oven of clay, an old-fashioned veranda outside, a bed with four posts built into the ground, a door made out of three boards held together by two stakes placed crosswise--quickly made and well made--whoever was not pleased with it, let him make something he liked better.

At the top of the village, that is to say on the highest point, was a sort of building which the Saraceneses called the "church." It was a heap of old tree trunks piled one on the top of the other in the form of walls. In the old days--when, one does not know--these