

UP THE DERBYSHIRE WYE: A SKETCH IN OUTLINE.



I would be an interesting task for the archæological genius, which Carlyle calls "gentle dulness," to account for the identity in name of distinct English rivers running in diametrically opposed directions in different parts of the country. We have, for instance, a river Ouse which, after draining Yorkshire, flows into the Humber; there is Cowper's sluggish Ouse, rising in Northamptonshire and passing Ely and Huntingdon, Bedford and Buckingham, on its way to the Wash; while a third Ouse enters the English Channel. There is a Derwent in Lake-land which joins the Irish Sea, and a second Derwent which feeds the Trent. The youthful student of home geography is further puzzled by three Avons—the South Avon, the Bristol Avon, and Shakespeare's classic Avon at Stratford. And are there not two separate Wyes—the wooded water-valley of the West, and the sylvan stream of the Peak country? I recalled some of the beauties of the bewitching Monmouthshire river in a recent number of this Magazine,* and now I should like to hold a brief for its picturesque North Midland namesake.

The dual rivers are alike only in name. It is, perhaps, a piece of local vanity to describe the Derbyshire Wye as a river at all. It would be more correct to designate it a mountain stream; for, while its Western rival is more than a hundred miles long, and broad and deep, and carries ships and steamers to and from the sea, the Peak streamlet is always narrow, never navigable, and so short that you may follow its serpentine wanderings, from its embouchure at Rowsley to its source at Buxton, in one day's dilatory walk. Perhaps the brevity of the stream enhances its beauty. It is picturesque throughout its entire course. There is no break in the natural loveliness, and every scene is linked together in a series of successive surprises—

"Each step
Awakes fresh beauties, each short point presents
A different picture; new, and yet the same."

To enjoy the Derbyshire Wye we must not leave its side. Boating is out of the question, on account of the number of cascades and stranded rocks; and if we drive along the turnpike road we shall often lose sight of the river altogether, to say nothing of the delicious valleys which it silvers. So we leave the mediæval "Peacock" at Rowsley—the Mecca of fishermen, whose rods and tackle festoon the hall—burdened with no baggage save a pouch or wallet, and with no other aid to locomotion than a walking-

stick, for a waterside pilgrimage in the Peak. We are early risers, but the sun was up before us, and is glorifying the landscape with a wealth of bright colour. Ripples of light and shadow are chasing each other on the hill-sides. The birds are singing a May madrigal in the trees which fringe the river, and the musical swirl of the current adds new notes to their melody. In the limpid Derwent there is a daguerreotype of the quaint old bridge, complete grey stone for grey stone, arch for arch, lichen for lichen, while the greenery of the banks looks admiringly at itself in the liquid looking-glass.

The Wye, after picking up several companions on the way, and tired with its wanderings, settles down at Rowsley into a quiet alliance with the peaceful Derwent; and it is at this junction of the two rivers that we commence to trace the tributary stream. From Rowsley to Bakewell, it waters, with many a graceful curve and intricate winding, a verdurous valley which has been called the "Garden of the Peak." At Fillyford Bridge, half-way between Rowsley and Bakewell, the Wye receives to its bosom the bright-eyed Bradford, which sparkling stream has just been enriched by the waters of the Lathkill, a little limpid river which gives a name to one of the most secluded and sylvan of Derbyshire dales. Meandering through flower-gemmed meadows, our stream reaches the wooded hill-side from which Haddon Hall looks down upon the valley. The baronial battlements are half-smothered in foliage, and the birds are singing their loudest, as if to awaken the hoary old towers to fresh life. A dragon-fly floats through the air, a glimmer of gauzy light; and a kingfisher contemplates his own burnished breast of sapphire and gold in the flowing mirror. The dull grey of the castle walls, mixed up with the bright tender green of the trees, with the olive-hued river babbling at the foot of the feudal pile, forms a poetic picture that lingers in the memory like a delicious dream. Past the old-fashioned foot-bridge, past mead and mansion, glade and grove, until Bakewell, "the metropolis of the Peak," is reached. A pleasant half-hour is passed in this old-world town in visiting the historic church, and chatting about trout with the Izaak Waltons and Charles Cottons who hang over the antique bridge, where the Wye is wide and river-like, until it loses itself in the emerald meadows beyond. Some school-children are despatching paper ironclads to an imaginary enemy in a supposititious Besika Bay. Happy, happy boys! innocent yet of the seething sea of life beyond, whose remorseless waves are waiting to make shipwreck of your dreams. Sauntering by the banks of the stream again—artificial at Lumsford Mills, lake-like at Ashford Hall, tranquil at Ashover, with its sunny cottages and shady trees—at Monsal Dale we have the most enchanting section of the stream. We come suddenly upon Longstone Edge, and the abruptness of the view below stuns the imagination. We

* "A Dream of the Western Wye" (see p. 175).

find a green carpet upon the grassy acclivity. The river wanders, like a band of burnished silver, under the wild wooded slopes of the deep valley beneath. Faint curls of blue smoke come from a farmhouse in the valley; on the hill-side a few mountain sheep are finding herbage; the river is crossed here by stepping-stones, there by a rustic bridge; a cow stands knee-deep in the water, and its dappled shadow mixes with the blue tint of heaven reflected in the running stream. The wooded ravine, the higher moorland, the jutting cliffs, are the mere outlines of a picture whose colouring and gradation only the Divine Academician could fill in. Lord Byron declared that there are prospects in Derbyshire as "noble as in Greece or Switzerland," and Monsal Dale endorses with its beauty the poet's testimony. The dale is a dream of scenery. It is the Happy Valley of "Rasselas." A person of the most prosaic temperament might be challenged to pass along this moorland shelf at Longstone Edge without involuntarily pausing to take a mental photograph of the romantic scene. Monsal Dale is Arcadian in its tranquil simplicity, and there is none of the awe-inspiring grandeur about it so characteristic of Miller's Dale, which we reach after a three miles' ramble through some of the most striking scenery the British Isles can afford. Cressbrook Dale is a parenthesis between the two valleys, and we make a short détour at the cotton-mills, which diversify the interest of the scenery. Here the river widens into links of loch, burnished by the sun into sheets of silver, framed in glowing green, and overhung by wooded cliffs that rise to ambitious heights. Workmen's cottages are scattered on the hill-side, and the railway runs on a rocky terrace over the river, the heavy engineering works harmonising with the majesty of nature. In Miller's Dale there are clouds of plump trout with their pretty heads poised against the stream. A number of "Complete Anglers" are scattered along the river-margin, some of them experts in the gentle art, who whip the water with skilful ease; others are embryos in the craft, with brand-new rods and tackle, and creels exasperatingly empty, which yesterday, no doubt, were in the windows of Buxton shopkeepers. Very musical is the river; demonstrative as it bounds, foam-flecked, past great boulders of lichen-covered rock; dreamy as it pauses for breath in the deeper pools, where it is arched by bending foliage, and kissed by the loving greenery of the banks.

"For busy thoughts the stream flows on
In foamy agitation,
And sleeps in many a crystal pool
For quiet contemplation."

Under jutting rocks capped with trees, and past mossy dells silvered with tiny tributary streams of crystal, the Wye wimples on its way. At Chee Tor the scenery reaches a climax of wild grandeur. The glen contracts, and the giant form of Chee rises to a height of 360 feet—a stupendous geological headland, a promontory of rock, with a clinging plant here and there lending a gleam of green to the grim grey limestone, and rooks and daws holding a noisy concert in the

giddy clefts in the summit. Facing this solemn cliff is a crescent of rock, festooned with foliage, and corresponding in shape and size and strata to the great convex bastion opposite, from which, in some prehistoric convulsion, it must have been severed. There is a perilous path over the river, which is rushing headlong through the rocky abyss many feet below. After this Alpine pass is left behind, the dale again widens, and the rocks are less bare. We tread leg-deep in ferns and undergrowth to Blackwell Mill. Here the shriek and roar of the Midland express, speeding Manchester-wards on the lofty viaduct above, reminds us how narrow is the frontier-line between fact and fancy, how thin the partition between the dwelling-place of Pan and Apollo and naiads and water-nymphs, and the busy world of profit and loss and fever-fret. Under the precipice of Topley Pike—whose beauty is being much impaired by limestone workings—and we find the Wye giving life and loveliness to Ashwood Dale. Here the water is touched by the sun into reaches of liquid light; there it is hidden, as it flows under hanging crags clothed with clinging ferns and ivy, and billowy masses of oak and ash, mingled with the light feathery form of the birch and the darker branches of pine and fir. That opening in the rocks to the left is the Lovers' Leap. It is a great gaping gorge between two precipices, which, according to a local legend, was jumped in safety by the horse bearing two runaway lovers. The horse-flesh of our degenerate days is certainly not capable of such phenomenal feats, and modern lovers have too much regard for their necks to commit themselves to such Curtius-like enterprises.

The presence of invalid carriages and Bath chairs is eloquent of the near proximity of Buxton, and in a few minutes we are in the Spa of the Peak. Art has here tampered with the natural wanderings of the Wye. The stream is laid out in set pieces, which look like mathematical figures in water, and diverted by ornamental gardeners to meander through muddy, serpentine mazes, and to make artificial waterfalls. About a mile from Buxton is the source of the Wye. The wilful river leaps into life and liberty at the foot of a hill leading to Poole's Hole—a mine whose wonders were celebrated by Hobbes in Latin verse, and have been the theme of a thousand and one scribblers since. The Wye is born inside the wonderful cavern, and the infant river may be heard fretting in the darkness, impatient to enter the wide world it is about to beautify. But our tramp has rendered our appetite too ravenous to allow us to inspect the miracles of Poole's Hole now, so we will hie back to Buxton. The hotels have certainly improved in the town since the seventeenth century, when, according to Lord Macaulay, "the gentry of Derbyshire and of the neighbouring counties repaired to Buxton, where they were crowded into low wooden sheds, and regaled with oatcake, and with a viand which the hosts called mutton, but which the guests strongly suspected to be dog." There is something better than disguised dog at the "Crescent" to-day, and the dinner-bell is now ringing.

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