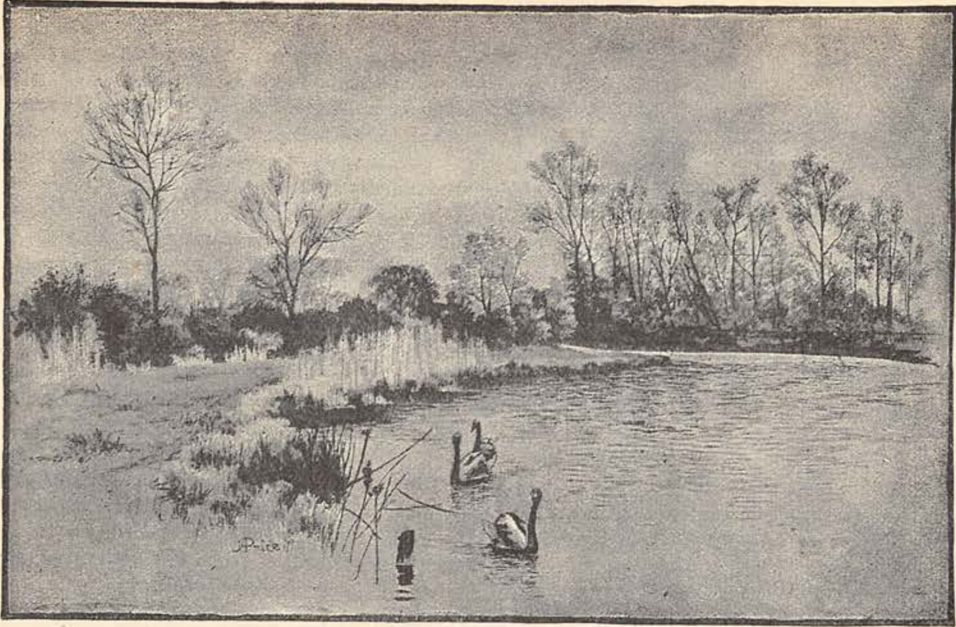

A RIVERSIDE REVERIE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "ALL ABOUT DERBYSHIRE."

I AM sitting, on this stilly summer afternoon, in a vagrant and altogether idle sort of way, by the side of an English river north of the Trent, of which, in fact, it is one of the tributaries. It is a little river, but fuller of philosophy than all the folios—richer in vocal expression than operatic scores; more picturesque in wild and rocky beauty than any vision that poetic painter has placed upon canvas, although many artists of sympathetic feeling have given us choice transcripts of its romantic stream. It is a river with a winning individuality and many phases of character. It chatters with the cheerful loquacity of Tennyson's Brook, but there are varying modulations in its voice. It is communicative to the loiterer by its banks, and gives to his soul the confidences shared by bending foliage, reflected flower, flitting insect, and tangled fern. Sometimes the voice is tender and tremulous; now it is eager and whispering; anon loud in laughing jubilance as the current tears in breathless hurry past the ruggedly sculptured rocks, bearded with moss, and the projecting limestone tors that look, in their setting of green, like pinnacles carved out of snow; in other places it sings a slow and murmuring lullaby as it rushes over the pebbles, and makes harp-strings of the bladed weeds that bend to its play. In the night time, under the ivory moonlight and beneath the gaze of the mysterious stars, the music is plaintive, with subdued tones and eloquent minor chords, that seem in constant keeping with the silent and listening darkness. But the soliloquising stream is never silent, from her birth in the hills to her betrothal with the big river beyond. Whatever key the music may be pitched in, there is everlasting song.

Next to the vocal attributes of this northern river, come its reflective powers. Although having its home amid the morose grit-stone wilds of Axe Edge, and trickling from rill to rivulet, and rivulet to river, brown with the stain of the moorland peat, the water in its subsequent passage through the lonely limestone dales has changed its local colour and become crystalline. The deep translucent pools shine like liquid glass, mirroring the hanging shore bough for bough, leaf for leaf, flower for flower, and duplicating, with unbroken line, lichened stone and limestone tor. The bright-winged insect that skims over the clear surface sails double in its flight; the birds that flit from bank to bank have their journeys recorded in the water; even the white clouds that move slowly in the great dome of blue sky so far away above are brought down to the river-bed, and float there as if they were argosies of pearl. The reflective power of this pellucid river is not confined to its surface, but at the bottom of the water you behold the trout and grayling repeated upon the sand and pebbles, darting

from under gnarled roots and rising with a splash to a fly, just as in a shadow pantomime. There is almost as much landscape *in* the water as above it. And the landscape that is above it! The green solitude; the wild life, especially of birds; the study of flowers and foliage in these woods, which are so many fern-paradises; the encroaching hills; the old baronial castle just at hand, with its feudal traditions and its love-legends; and, almost as near, the famous modern palace, whose windows flash like diamonds in a setting of emeralds.

How can the impotent prose-writer with a few feeble pen-scratches hope to picture this changeful feeling and varied beauty? As Mr. Ruskin says: "It is like trying to paint a soul!" Mr. Ruskin has, indeed, depicted "the floretted banks and foam-crisped wavelets of this sweetly wilful stream;" and the very glen in which I am spending this summer day, listening to the voiceful water, is a favourite haunt of this high-souled man. I recall the rapture of his description of this "beauty-spot." He thus addresses us: "Learned traveller, gentle and simple—but, above all, English paterfamilias—think what this little piece of mid-England has brought into so narrow a compass, of all that should be most precious to you. In its very minuteness it is the most educational of all the districts of beautiful landscape known to me. The vast masses, the luxurious colouring, the mingled associations of great mountain scenery, amaze, excite, overwhelm, or exhaust—but too seldom teach; the mind cannot choose where to begin. But Derbyshire is a lovely child's alphabet; an alluring first lesson in all that's admirable, and powerful chiefly in the way it engages and fixes the attention. On its miniature cliffs a dark ivy-leaf detaches itself as an object of importance; you distinguish with interest the species of mosses on the top; you count, like many falling diamonds, the magical drops of its petrifying well; the cluster of violets in the shade is an Armida's garden to you. And the grace of it all, and the suddenness of its enchanted changes, and terrorless grotesque! It was a meadow a minute ago, now it is a cliff, and in an instant is a cave; and here was a brooklet, and now it is a whisper under ground; turn but the corner of the path, and it is a little green lake of incredible crystal; and if the trout in it lifted up their heads and talked to you, you would be no more surprised than if it was in the 'Arabian Nights.' And half a day's work of half a dozen navvies, and a snuff-box full of dynamite, may blow it all into Erebus and diabolic night for ever and ever!" Has Mr. Ruskin, even, given us a more pregnant passage than this?

But there are other people, who would not like to be denominated navvies, who do much to profane this virgin beauty. The higher reaches of the river where we are loitering are unspeakable because of the refuse that a gas-works and sewage-tanks throw into it, and it is only given it to recuperate itself along the limestone bed further down the stream, where it becomes clear and radiant again. The pagans had a reverence for their rivers. They did not cause a laughing and leaping stream to be smudged into sobriety by street-sweepings; nor did they regard transparency as a defect to be improved by the addition of dyes, chemicals, the *débris* of tan-yards, and the contents of the cesspool.

But to return to our little river. I have mentioned the fact that it owes the lambent light of its water to the deep and devious limestone dales which it threads like a narrow ribbon of silver. Many a tributary rill from fern-cave and mossy dell is added to it on the way, mere tricklings from fissures in the alabaster-like

crags, and wayside contributions from the steep and wooded slopes, in whose green gloom you hear the soft "coo-coo—co-co—coo-oo" of the ring-dove, and see the startled pheasant rise from the undergrowth and take to flight with a velocity which reminds you of a bomb-shell with a tail attached to it. On the bleak moorlands, that rise high and marshy above these hanging woods and winding valley, there comes the "pee-wit" of the lapwing; and now and again comes the vibrating whistle of the "whaup."

But it is nearer the river-margin that the bird-life is most interesting. The tors are alive with jackdaws, with their incessant "caw, craw"; from the hidden cliffs, protected by tree or bush, comes a harsh, chattering note, that calls attention to the flight of a jay of resplendent plumage. The river-brink is the haunt of the kingfisher, whose burnished breast throws a patch of opulent Oriental colour into the liquid looking-glass in which he regards himself, a solitary sentry, perched on a little moss-grown promontory of rock, to fly away, when disturbed, like a flash of fallen rainbow, to the next bend of the stream. The water-ouzel, or "dipper," stands upon a "lepping-stone," ready for a dive, dropping suddenly into the water to re-appear further down the stream. A moor-hen gathers her brood together with a sudden "chirp-chirp," for she has detected a water-rat, most dexterously amphibious, making across the current to her home among the reeds and rushes. But more dangerous vermin than water-rats exist in the valley. Both the otter and the badger are common, though not so numerous as the stoats. A dozen or more captured members of this ferret and weazel family are nailed on a board by the Duke's forester as a warning to other furred and ferine poachers who infest these preserves. There is another board, for the existence of which I hope there will be no excuse the next time we visit these secluded dells. It is from a Ducal House, and on it is posted a notice begging tourists who picnic in these picturesque retreats not to take away flowers and ferns *by the roots*. The request is surely a very reasonable one; for the heedless "cheap-tripper" will "harry" as many choice ferns and wild-flowers as he can carry away with him to the excursion train, only for these gems of nature to pine away and die dismally far from the pure air, the unpolluted water, and the idyllic surroundings of their native home.

I follow the radiant river in all its wilful wanderings and wanton bendings, noticing the action of the limestone water here and there upon the bed of the river, where a tree-trunk, or other forest growth, has in flood-time been washed down and stuck fast in a submerged position at some acute angle it was unable to pass. It has been converted by the petrifying action of the water into "tuffa" stone, a beautiful product peculiar to these parts—a white and congealed mass of rock, in which fern and leaf and branch are welded into fantastic and capricious forms. Presently the dale widens, and there are breadths of green meadow as level as lawns, on which fairies might dance in the moonlight. There is not a soul about, and the sweet herbage is covered with rabbits, for the afternoon is spent, and it is early evening. Rabbits by hundreds; yea, thousands. A shout, a clap of the hands, and what a scurry and scamper there is: what a vision of little white tails in full retreat! I wander down the stream. The evening air is sweet with the perfume of hay and the scent of the snowy elder-tree. A loaded wain of newly-mown hay stands in relief against a mass of dark and shadowy elms. Further still I wander by the water; past the hoary walls and historic battlements of the feudal castle I spoke of just now; past the ivy-clad gables of an hostelry almost as ancient as the baronial hall; and now our little river leaves us to join company with a deeper and stronger stream. The lambent light has left the face of the small current, for the larger river is brown with the peat-stain of the Hallamshire moorlands. Our streamlet altogether loses its individuality, and there is no more singing. At this "meeting of the waters," this Mesopotamia of the Midlands, I must arouse myself from my riverside reverie, and return once more to that world which Rosalind found "so full of briars."