

Our River

By Mrs. Murray Hickson

IN these wonderful days of late September—hot as August, yet filled with the finality and sadness of Autumn—there come to me, beside the river, many imaginings, quaint, grotesque, and pathetic. Here, where the sunshine falls in quivering patches between closely-growing leaves, where the water rests, without stir or ripple, under the shadows ; here, where the current is so slow that my boat, tied bow and stern to hazel boughs, moves not, neither swings one inch from her moorings—here I lie and, as befits the height of such an Indian summer, dream the hours away, in company with my own thoughts and the soft stir and rustle of insect life around me. Beneath the spell of this golden weather one learns the great lesson of tranquillity. Now, if never before, do I realise that the best thing in life (and beyond it for aught we know) is peace—peace profound, warm and unruffled—peace so touched with knowledge and accustomed sadness that sorrow has no power to disturb it—peace such as one finds any afternoon during the last few weeks, upon the banks, or on the bosom of this deep-set stream of ours. For nothing disturbs its still flow ; not even the floods which, at times, sweep down its course from the higher lands above. It swells, and rises—true. But the current runs only more full, not less quietly ; the movement

ment towards the sea is just as smooth and imperceptible ; the surface remains impenetrable and dark as ever.

Lately, day after day, under hot sunshine, the river has lain placid as a lake. Slowly past my boat, leaves and twigs drift downward with the stream ; so slowly that they seem to move of their own accord, unpropelled by any force greater than a fragile volition. Now and again a daddy-longlegs, caught in the miniature *débris* of twigs and grasses, struggles vainly for liberty—a discordant note in the universal acquiescence. One sees nothing, one feels nothing, save rest ; rest absolute and unconditional ; rest accentuated by the lazy hum of gnats, undisturbed by the occasional soft plop and gurgle of a fish as he rises to the glassy surface. As yet the trees have hardly begun to turn, but, here and there, a mass of yellow outlines itself against the dusky green of deeper woods beyond. The leaves which strew the river, a gently moving carpet, are unfaded, though now and again one notices two or three more shrivelled than the rest—Autumn is upon us but Summer lingers still. I wonder could any *young* man or woman appreciate such a place in such weather ? Surely one needs the experience of middle age to understand and value the tranquillity of these loitering hours.

Up and down the banks at far distances are stationed fishermen, dozing through long days from early morning till the sun sets and mists begin to gather. No one of them is near enough to be disturbed by his neighbour ; each stands alone, isolated and apart, content with his own company and the occasional capture of an unwary pike or roach. The struggles and death of the victim are blots upon Nature's tranquillity ; yet they pass swiftly and leave behind them a calm deepened by contrast with the momentary turmoil. Rings in the water ; splashes ; a plunging fish—then gasping silence, and hot sunshine on silver scales, half hidden

hidden in lush-growing grass. After that, once again spells of dreaming, and the lazy waiting for a bite, longed for, yet partly to be deprecated. No one under these cloudless skies of Autumn wishes to bestir himself and, for my part, fishing appears to me a sheer barbarity, for which I am at once too indolent and too humane.

Yet, without marring her quietude, our river also gathers in her toll. Only last week a boat was found floating, bottom upwards, near the place where we are wont to bathe. The water just there is deep ; one cannot see the bottom. Close beside the difficult banks is standing-place indeed ; but a standing-place of mud so soft that the straining feet are drawn into its slimy depths. This upturned boat puzzled us, but, on such a day, danger seemed infinitely distant, and I, for one, gave the derelict craft no second thought until, as we sculled homewards through gathering twilight, we came upon men dragging the quiet river for drowned bodies. Even so the thing appeared monstrous, impossible ; and we drifted onwards, deeming it an ugly, baseless scare.

Do you remember the lines which preface one of Rudyard Kipling's tales ?

Tweed said tae Till,
"What gaes ye rin sae still ?"
Till said tae Tweed,
"Though ye rin wi' speed,
And I rin slaw,
For each man ye droon,
I droon twa."

Well, our river is like that ; just so gentle and remorseless. They found the poor bodies next day—quiet enough now, and still for evermore ; unable to tell us one word of that fight for life which had taken place under the hot, bright sunshine ; unable to say
whether

whether—at the last—the river gave to them its own unfathomable calm.

I have felt, since this episode, a certain awe mingled with my love for the restful river ; that awe with which any force, at once placid and resistless, must always inspire us. A few days ago I saw two girls out alone, high up the stream, just where thick woodlands slope to the water's edge. Here, in a narrow cliff, nestled amidst close-growing trees, the sand-martins build ; and here long tangled trails of blackberry dangle and dip beneath the current. Here too it is exceedingly difficult to effect a landing and, if one be not a strong swimmer, the task is well nigh hopeless.

I looked at the girls, and I looked at the boat. It was the very boat out of which those two poor lads last week had lost their lives. The girls were laughing and light-hearted ; the busy birds flew hither and thither : above our heads a golden sun blazed in a sapphire sky, and sky and birds and girls were all mirrored, clear as life, in the still waters on which we rested. At that moment the river seemed to me like Death—resistless, cruel, inevitable, yet with a beauty which I could neither gainsay nor comprehend. I wonder, when we really know, whether Death too may prove a Great Tranquillity.