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The River of Everlasting Happiness.

By G. W. P.

THERE is, in far Cathay, a river beautiful, hardly known, unspoilt, where is found Nirvana for all cares; it is the River of Everlasting Happiness, the Yüenfu. There, one May evening, as the tropical sun dipped behind the guardian mountain and left on the troubled estuary, where river merges into sea, a path of gold and purple, we spread our broad, white sail and shook the dust of man from off us. The breeze gained as the sun declined, till the golden sand-bank where we were anchored became violet, then grey, then a steel-blue narrow band on the horizon.



INTERIOR OF CAVE TEMPLE

teak deck, and watched the lights springing up like fireflies in some village on the banks.

Our boat was a Chinese house-boat, built by some wealthy merchant or luxurious mandarin. His oriental taste had fashioned it voluptuously. The white sails hummed overhead, and the low free-board was so near the water that the gurgle of the bows cutting the hastening tide was loud in our ears as we lay on our cushions spread on the white

The darkness grew, for the lovely twilight is ephemeral in these latitudes. We hear the deep-toned temple gong sending its call to prayer from the eerie of white stone on the mountain's top. It is the resort of pilgrims from far away—of the suffering and of the grateful, of the lone wife



THE ESTUARY AT SUT'IEH.

and the newly-wedded daughter, the Temple of the Goddess of Mercy. As we listen, the bells of a hundred shrines and rest houses and smaller temples take up the summons, and the Drum Mountain, Kushan, re-echoes with the music for a few moments; then growing fainter, the bells cease. The only sound is the splash of a white cascade over a water-mill as it tumbles to the river close beside our boat, or the cry of the night-heron sailing along the bank.



FISHERMAN'S HUT.

A word to the ancient mariner at the helm, followed by the rattle of the anchor chain, and we are fast, close to the flight of old, grey, stone steps, which have been trodden by pilgrims for many a century.

We, too, are pilgrims, spending our honeymoon on the River of Everlasting Happiness, and we too must pay homage to the goddess.

As we land, from over the mountain sails the moon, a true queen of the tropical night, as if provided by the goddess for our safe conduct to her shrine, to light up our steep path through the pine-woods, and to beautify the worn granite steps and arches till we are in fairyland.

Upward between the pines, passing now and again votive inscriptions wrought in the solid granite by some pilgrim whose prayer has been answered, even as ours will be, we cross the rushing, foaming mountain torrent by the willow-pattern marble bridges, while the moonlight plays strange tricks with the bars of shadow on the stones. Disturbing at their complines, now an owl, now a heron, we reach a tea-house, full of wonder at the beauty of our road where man's presence seems a sacrilege, and yet man made it—and what man! It seems inconceivable that it can be the same race whose name



POOL AT THE BAMBOO GROVE.

now is a by-word of contempt to us Westerners. Chinese stagnation, Chinese sordidness we know full well. Can it be true that they have fashioned patiently this fairyland, and have taken advantage of nature's beneficence to carve this road of consummate art?

Once at the temple the problem becomes more profound, the man and place are more incongruous still. The whining priest, the tawdry vestments, the sordid trappings of the shrine, are out of harmony with the glorious carvings and the dignity of the different chapels. The gilded goddess at least commands respect. Resplendent and peaceful, she watches unmoved the coming and going of her thousand worshippers, and answers their supplications or not as she thinks fit.

Again outside the temple we look down on the silver winding of the river at our feet till, many miles away, past the sleeping city of Foochow, it is lost in shadowy mountains whose feet it laves unceasingly. At dawn we pass under the "Bridge of Ten Thousand Ages," built of massive granite piers, huge blocks quarried from the mountains ages past when China could attain what she does not attempt now.



CHILDREN AT THE RIVERSIDE.

We slip past the city, crowned with the blue vapour of countless wood fires, showing that the early rice is being cooked. It is a city of squalor and dirt, dominated by the "Altar of Heaven," a block of basalt sharply cut against the rosy sky, and again we are alone, save for a fishing boat or timber raft which speeds past us on the tide. Now comes a rapid boat, shallow of draught, strongly built, to withstand the shocks of the rapids over which it has travelled from the interior of Fukien. As they work, the crew chant the Song of the River; the same chant probably which was in use five hundred years ago.



WATER WHEEL.

On still through the passes where the bamboo rafts lie like huge centipedes on the water waiting for a favouring tide. On each lies a guardian dog, and as we sail past he runs the length of his raft, barking at the strange sight, for we must seem to him like some huge white bird, this yacht of ours. And when he has ended his patrol the next dog takes up his cause and so on till the rafts are passed.

After these we see a fleet of fishing boats being poled along inshore

against the tide, picturesque with their lights and shades, tenanted by a whole family, its poultry and often a pig; all hands sometimes at work with the nets, sometimes drying these on the mast, a mat or dilapidated flour sack doing duty as a sail.

Presently the river narrows, rocks and mountains dropping to the water edge with a myriad cataracts, as if nature had wept with delight at her own loveliness and had forgotten to dry her tears.

The rice fields are far behind us in the low-lying land—they have given place to groves of feathery silver-green bamboos ever waving, and higher on the hill-side a riot of purple and white shows where the azaleas are in flower. But the bamboo is the feature of the scene. It is everywhere. Here and there they are cutting it, and when denuded of its leaves tie its stems into the narrow rafts to be turned to a thousand uses when it reaches Foochow. The bamboo is as essential to the Chinese as their tea.



FISHING-BOATS—DREDGING-NETS.

We drop anchor to land and explore the wonders of the famous Bamboo Grove, lurching luxuriously by the edge of a deep, transparent pool, bordered by banks of begonias and maidenhair fern. Then up the mountain side to get a bird's eye view of the valley. Following the charcoal burners' narrow path, our dog stops, bristles and suddenly cowers while a movement of the dwarf bamboo scrub and the deep panting tells us that some wild beast has passed, possibly a leopard, for there are many here. Higher and higher, till the air is fresh, and here at the summit there are no trees but heather and gorse and two kites wheeling overhead.

Down to the boat again, anchor weighed and poles out, for now we have to ascend a rapid, with two feet of water only covering the rocks.



CHARCOAL BURNERS.

Here is a cormorant raft, with its crew of six birds and a stunted little man in the stern to punt the raft among the shallows, and to collect the spoil. Our cook purchases the catch for a small coin and we feast regally on fresh river carp. On past rows of junks waiting, possibly, for weeks until the river should rise sufficiently to lift them over the shallows.

Curious craft are they, with a lofty bridge amidships on which the steersman stands, with the end of the huge tiller in his hand. This rudder or oar, as long again as the hull, is nicely balanced, and weighted till it obeys the slightest touch, otherwise a mistake of a few inches, and the boat is shattered against some needle rock in the middle of a rapid.

Some children are playing fearlessly in the treacherous stream, sitting astride logs and shooting the less violent shallows—they shout to us and we have them swimming for a handful of biscuits.

Now we have passed into stiller, deeper water, and can watch the banks as they drift by us, whitened by banks of



A RIVERSIDE VILLAGE.

gleaming brier roses and huge lilies. Here and there a fisherman's hut with a patch of lotus is visible and nets hanging to dry till the night, when with torch and canoe the lonely toiler will attract fish without much effort. We saw that night some canoes drifting with the current, the fish jumping at the light of the torch in the bows, and once in the hollow canoe unable to regain their stream.

The next dawn found us at the foot of a famous mountain like Kushan, crowned with a monastery, but no palace of white stonework this. The Yüen-



YÜENFU CAVE TEMPLE.

fu temple is dedicated to the river god and though large is fashioned in a cave. The front looks over a precipice many hundred feet straight down, into a deep gully which guides the sacred stream to the river which it purifies and hallows.

The river god has a strange dwelling; a hermit priest guards the shrine and for years has tended it alone. Hard by, it is said, lies a vaster and more magnificent temple, but no foreigner has seen it. No bribe would tempt the priest to be our guide, and still it remains undesecrated by the white man. Quietly we returned by the long steep path to the river's bank, and thence, by the loveliest way it has been our fortune to travel, down the glorious River of Everlasting Happiness, our boat drifted back to civilization.