

OUR RIVER. From Eliza Cook's Journal, 1853

WE are going to say a few words about the most classical river in the world. It is no use for your Niebuhrian scholar to turn round upon us, and advocate the superior antiquity and associations of the Tiber. We know all about wolves turning nurses, augurs throwing consecrated dolls over the doubtful parapet of an osier bridge; we know all about the Hissus, the Cephissus, and every other river in which nymphs or philosophers dipped their unsandalled footsteps; but we also cherish an obstinate partiality for our own opinion, especially as concerns the tributary of Father Thames, "our river at Oxford."

Whence shall we begin? Shall we fancy ourselves a daring party of four, who have just started from Richmond, and intend to row the whole way down, and to finish at Godstowe? Shall we take the reverse course, and start from Iffley Lock, with no other victualling than Allsopp and cigars, and finish by finding ourselves in the middle of a foggy night, and the Thames? Either way, both the journey and the story would be too long; so we will content ourselves with roaming up and down the stream, a few miles both east and west from Christ Church Meadow.

We have not time to talk about these delightful "groves of Academus" now. We are merely passing through them on our way to the boats. We see the big, unwieldy, bright-green wooden edifices standing out of the water, in which some few dozen people appear to emulate a Chinese life on the river. There is every variety and caste in these boats. Oxford men will be exclusives, and, besides, one boat would never furnish enough room for all. Suppose you are one of the privileged, or are invited; we step inside, and a pleasing sort of miniature club-room meets our eye. Pens and ink, newspapers, and such like appurtenances of the reading-room, make the "University Boat" a pleasing line of connection between the life of the river and the life of the daily world. And sometimes the long "mahogany" groans under a weight of refreshments more or less substantial, and certainly far from being ungrateful after the heat of a day in June. The larger colleges enjoy a boat of this description to themselves, and the cockney will be rejoiced by the sight of a couple of ex-civic barges, which are now enjoying a quiet, immovable existence, seldom disturbed by the oar, except when a swell of the river or some change in the arrangements has rendered it necessary to shift them.

But King's barge is, *par excellence*, the barge of the river. How you find yourself in a chaos of hats, caps, and boating-coats and Jerseys of every degree of repair or seediness! How rigidly and how conscientiously the right of such property and the precise title-deed of possession are ascertained and respected can only be told by those skilled in the costume of the river. Of hats, however, the fashions have been less rigorously observed, and many a boat's crew may be seen on the river, strangely forgetful of that accurate distinction of uniform, which it would have been thought high treason to violate.

In another part of the boat, oars, rudders, masts of "dingies," and other such matters, are heaped together in that systematic confusion which makes the uninitiated wonder how it is possible to find anything. On one side a punt is being got ready. The preparation is not very elaborate. A couple of poles, tipped with a kind of iron cloven foot, are flung in, and after them a clumsy half sand-bag, half cushion,

covered with some one of those fancy druggets which look so neat in men's rooms for the first three months they are laid down, and which ravel into cabbage-nets in a twelvemonth's wear. It is a curious division of labour. The young gentleman who punts is an enthusiast. His light muscular figure is in strange contrast to that of his burly friend who is going to smoke himself quietly to sleep, and who proves to be more than ballast at the bow end, if a punt can be thought susceptible of such local distinctions. Good punting is not common. People cannot see that the easier they take it the better the punt cleaves its way. Watch yonder heavily freighted boat. Despite the distractions of two pretty young ladies and the weight of their mamma, "dear Augustus" never loses an inch, never gets jammed into that wooden intricacy at the entrance to the "weirs," and yet seems to be doing it all for their amusement.

But we are digressing. King's barge is the great centre of the Oxford navy. From King's barge float the streamers which announce, by their respective heights, the winners of the day, and the relative state of the naval prowess of the various colleges. Who knows not the anxiety with which, at the termination of the race,—when *See the Conquering Hero* is performed as a drum and trombone duet, when Christ Church has kept, or Brazen Nose "won the head of the river" when Lincoln has "bumped" Worcester, or Pembroke "taken off";—who knows not how all eyes are directed towards the lowering of those streamers, and their subsequent elevation, in the order of the victories. Who knows not Messrs. Spier's and Sons elaborate chart of straight, diagonal, and horizontal lines, to which, as to the books of the Admiralty (only with the probability of a more satisfactory result), you can appeal for the settlement of any historical doubt or difficulty touching the nautical achievements of Trinity or New College in days of yore?

It is a pleasant thing to see the motley group which a boat-race draws together. Town and gown amalgamate wonderfully. See that respectable middle-aged don, who is lifting half a dozen little boys and girls into a punt. You would not suppose that he is the great Professor of Inorganic Philosophy, and that all those little boys and girls are revelling in the delight of being out with "pa." But it is so. The worthy doctor has as great a love for boys and girls as for acids and alkaloids; and what is still more to his credit, he does not mind how many people know it. We love to see a don taking a genuine interest in the amusements of young men; it is a tacit acknowledgment of a natural sympathy which is far more conducive to "university extension" (in the best sense of the word) than the most severe lectorial ansterity. A boat-race seems to bridge over the unfathomable gulf between the don and the undergraduate. No don ever feels ashamed (unless he was a bad rower) of his ancient boating career. Veteran heads of houses will condescend to recommend boating as an exercise; and we have even known them unbend so far as to grant the use of the college-hall for a supper in honour of the heroes of the newly-achieved victory.

Aristocratically-dressed ladies, and tawdrily-dressed townswomen, demure daughters of dignitaries, and laughing "look-about-them" daughters of college servants, are thrown into a greater *melange* than at the most radical of public balls. Dog-dealers (there is *another* term, but not so nice), and gentlemen who walk about with a ratpreserve of wirework, or with an unfortunate rabbit in a bag; scouts just emancipated from the last wine-party, and all sorts of hangers-on of the hold-horses, "drinkyour-health" class, freely jostle their way among country rectors, who have

come "up" for Commemoration; fresh undergraduates, who have had a visit from some "lionesses," and who have spent their whole time since in calling upon their acquaintances to inform them of the fact; indiscreet young persons, who have got "engaged," and who are clearing the best way they can for the particular Emily of their affections. Children of all kinds are

baffling nursemaids and elder sisters, and tumbling about the grass between the meadow-path and the river.

Cast your eye across the stream, and look as far as you can down towards Iffley. A gun has just been fired— another, and another. Far down, on the opposite side, you discern an indistinct, moving mass, hurrying towards Oxford. Shouts are heard, at first all confused and chaotic, but gradually resolving into " Well done, Christ Church 1" " Well pulled, Brazen Nose," " Go it, Lincoln," "Go it, stroke," "Well done, Pembroke," and a rush of hundreds pours along the opposite bank; each man at the top of his voice, each man eulogistic or indignant, as the respective state of his own or of some other college boat may justify. The enthusiasts in a race always " run up" with the boats, and it is as exciting a sight as you would wish to behold, when one boat seems on the point of running into another, and that boat, with a few vigorous strokes, quickly places herself at a hopeless distance.

But Kir. King is the great aristocrat, the Rothschild of the Oxford navy. Let us glance at one of the humbler proprietors, who possesses a far smaller share of the confidence of the University, but who manages to live and get on, nevertheless. His boat is patched and dilapidated, and you would have some difficulty in imagining what it could have been originally. How does he live? Was there ever a time when he had not the rheumatism? How are his family brought up? Are they amphibious, and is he therefore free from fears as to their tumbling into the water? It is a curious state of things. Separated from land only by a yard and a half or so of water, they have no sympathies with aught but the river. They have a small kingdom of punts and canoes, over which he reigns as monarch. His children learn no natural history but that of the eel tribe, or of such fish as may be " trolled" for on the Isis: their accomplishments all bear some relation to the river, and their whole habits and character are of the river. He himself is a curious compound between cunning and ignorance, has had a hard battle to live, and knows well how to turn halfpence and sixpences in the direction of his own pockets. When the floods are out and the winds blow keenly enough to make vast ruin among the trees of the "broad walk," we would scarcely barter our chambers for his Noah's-ark style of residence.

Either way up the river there is plenty to be seen, plenty to interest, plenty to employ. Whether we would eat stewed eels at Godstowe, or play at skittles and drink beer at Sandford, the way to both places is a pleasant one. But you must live at Oxford at all seasons of the year if you would seek to know all the tricks which our favourite river chooses to play. When you look at those buttercupspangled fields, you would scarcely think of them as one expanse of foul swamp, sending forth its tribe of low fevers and malaria to gladden the hearts of the undertakers. When you look at a slightly distant view of Oxford, her grey towers and spires relieved against a still, silent ground of azure, you would hardly conceive her different appearance when the gloom of November or January greets you as you rise for matins. No place is so much at the mercy of the weather: as for the river, you can hardly tell where *that*

begins or ends, though not a few deaths tell the unhappy story of its too dangerous independence.

The boats themselves, like the jackets and caps of their navigators, are liable to the varying influence of Dame Fashion. Skiffs, outriggers, dingies, and then canoes—such is something like the succession of the last few years. When outriggers had been in fashion about three years, the authorities had just found out that they were dangerous, and requested their discontinuance—in much the same spirit of foresight which led them to forbid riflshooting after a club had been formed for that purpose, and which still attacks steeple-chasing and pigeon-shooting as soon as the season for those practices is over.

But let it not be supposed that "the river" is only the favourite of the University. Albeit there are no penny steamboats to unite Sandford and Iffley, or Iffley and Oxford, there are plenty of turns out among the townsmen—plenty of sculling and pulling matches, plenty of pic-nics, and fun of all kinds. To be sure, the scouts occasionally mistake their masters' boating-clothing for their own; and the style of rowing in the vacation is rather at a disadvantage compared with what goes on in term-time; but the people enjoy it, and we are contented.

Give us, however, a good trip to Nuncham, whether it be of the "brethren" of the Alfred Lodge, or of a troop of lively, and, as far as their spiritual health is concerned, well-cared-for children. Out comes one of the gigantic boats, with as much ceremony as the *Bucentaur* at its annual festival, and some fifty or sixty jolly Freemasons, lay and clerical, in trade or "professions," turn out to breathe fresh air, crack jokes, sing songs, and eat and drink with just enough moderation to allow heartiness to flourish. A good helter-skelter game at bowls, and general unbending on the part of everybody, from the demure High Church curate to the jolly double-chinned college porter. The day is a delightful one; and perhaps not a few brethren feel that, as far as uniting the minds and feelings of people, there is no bond like bright sunshine and free air.

But we prefer a children's pic-nic even to the mysterious delights of a masonic "day to Nuncham." Snatched for a day from the vicious dirtiness of St. Ebbe's or St. Thomas's, or from the poverty-stricken gloominess of Cowley, the children are instinct with a new kind of life. To tell how heartily they dance on board, and how extensive is the consumption of simple delicacies hitherto believed to have no existence, save in the mind of unread authors; to say how academical severity and clerical reserve relax, and delight in the happiness to which they have lent a hand; to relate how the little "slavey" of our own lodging used to ramble back to the recollection of such a trip in our own days of schooling, would be to tell a story of kindness not yet extinct, to read a lesson on one of those "touches of nature which make the whole world kin." The Isis becomes a dear patron saint, the object of one annual pilgrimage, fraught with no gloomy, but with many delightful, remembrances.

The river, too, has its tales of sadder interest. Near the "lakes" at Sandford, a diminutive obelisk marks the scene of one of those melancholy deaths by drowning, in which the attempt to save one sufferer involved both in a common fate. Scarcely a term passes in which some such accident does not take place. Yet the art of swimming is taught but tittle,—certainly not to the extent practised in the Rotunda at

Brighton. Of course, most of the "public-school" men can swim well enough, but some precaution ought to be taken to prevent men going upon the river till they have mastered this most important accomplishment.

A word, too, on the subject of boating, as pursued in the University. Boating is unquestionably the healthiest and most athletic, chest-expanding amusement pursued at Oxford, and one for which the place possesses every resource and advantage that can be desired. But there are as many varieties not only in the manner of pursuing this occupation, as in the men who practise it.

There are the men who boat, and who do little or nothing else. Ah! Messrs. King, Hall, and Co. how large a quota of the annual complement of "plucks" lies at your doors! How many are there who will undergo the self-denial of "early to bed and early to rise," of light meals and a strict abstinence from the smallest irregularity, and all to be "in good trim." Would that some of the same patient restraint wns brought to bear for other graver purposes.

Nevertheless, your thorough reading man is often a good boating man likewise. There are plenty of healthy young fellows, thank Heaven! who can keep both their heads and their arms at work, without finding one interfere with the other.

The Isis is a lovely river, taken for all in all. If you have known what it is to come home amid the fading glories of a hot summer's evening, one working, another singing, and two more joining in chorus,—now surveying the picturesque bit of water-mill scenery (of which our artists will never be tired) at Iffley,—now gazing upon a clear expanse of water formed by a "reach," and finally settling upon Magdalen Tower in the distance, now looking blacker and bolder in its relief against the sky,—if you have done all this, in the proud and comfortable consciousness that you have passed the schools, ami that a pair of sleeves and a less strict *regime* of morning chapels henceforth awaits you,—that you will have plenty of time for boating, without the fear of wasting time that may influence your whole future life, you, dear reader, will pardon any enthusiasm upon the subject of "our river;" and, if you be not a university man, you will rejoice to find that Isis is as great a friend and patron-saint to town as to gown. Perhaps, indeed, the town get the advantage, as they have the full benefit of the "long" vacation.

Yet, picturesque as is our river, we cannot get clear of the railway. Ever and anon, the visitor to Godstowe or Binsey is gratified by a *race*,—dead heat between the G.W. and the G.N.W.; and were he at the station, he would probably see one or two enthusiastic porters, and perhaps one of Mr. .Smith's purveyors of " literature for the rail," rushing frantically back from their place of observation, and announcing that "our side beat." It is all very well for you, gentlemen of the railway; but do you remember the boys and the frogs? Would it not be better if the firespitting dragons both of the G.W. and of the G.N.W. condescended to start a little quieter at first, and make a little less work for the coroner and the surgeon? We believe that many a sporting driver of a 'bus has figured in the petty courts for "furious driving" or "racing;" and we wish railway directors and omnibus-drivers could sometimes, *mulalis mutandis*, take each others' places.

But still, although we cannot get out of sight of the railway, our river is our true Alma Mater, after all. If she does give us a few colds and touches of rheumatism through her over-liberality in the winter, we have to thank her for many a fresh breeze, many a happy hour of relief from aching heads, and from dissatisfaction with ourselves and half the world besides. Again we say, *floreat Isis*.