The Beautiful River Min.

By Kate E. Kauffman.

PROBABLY the most beautiful province of China is Fukien. With the latitude of the lower Nile, it has the climate, flora, and natural scenery of Italy. Agreeable times to see it are in October or November, when the autumn flowers are glowing in their gold and crimson gorgeousness; in February, when the hills are a-bloom with violets; or in April, the month of strawberries and roses. One-third of its outline is sea-coast; it is separated from Chekiang and Kiangsi by mountains, and has two smaller ranges parallel with the coast. The Min and her tributaries meander through the valleys. By this arrangement there is combined what is essential to beautiful scenery—the variety of highlands with their soft tones of bluish purple, and of water with its vivacious sparkle and its poetic reflections.

Have you not wondered whether the poet overestimated the enjoyment of nature by "a pagan suckled in a creed outworn"? The names given to different localities in Fukien express a lively appreciation of its charms. Foochow means Happy Valley; Inghok, Eternal Happiness; Dionglök, Lasting Joy; Inghung, Always Summer; Yengping, Spreading Peace; Siengien, Fairy Land.

The greatest living socialist says "all men are alike as all rivers are made of water." Let us make acquaintance with the Min. It rises in the Sinloo Mountains, and for a while is like many another brook that has no great dignity or importance. Before it reaches Shauwu it is navigable; this is two hundred and fifty miles from Foochow; few Europeans with motives of mere curiosity have penetrated thus far. Missionaries know the pleasures of the journey, which, they say, are worthy to tempt the enterprising tourist. To gain the upward route requires three weeks, so frequent are the rapids and so numerous are other hindrances; the same distance, going down stream, is accomplished in three days. The modern St. Paul, if travelling alone, takes one of the native boats, only four feet wide, and thereby adds to the Apostolic list of perils. Less dangerous in appearance is the larger
native boat which can accommodate several persons. A bedroom fore and aft, with a central room for dining and social purposes, leave space for the sailors' convenience and manipulations. Those sailors! Hardy, handsome fellows; in their knowledge of the world simple as children; in their ability to battle with the elements, grand, strong men! The captain is rivelled in importance by the pilot, who, at the stern of the vessel, by means of a long oar, guides the craft. When passing through fairly propitious water, with only enough difficulty to require the effort, what pleasure it is to watch several boatmen swaying back and forth as they stand at their oars! One perceives the play of their muscles under their bronze skin, and their parted lips show their beautiful teeth. They beguile their toil by singing a rhythmic chant that only requires a Mendelssohn to transcribe into a composition that would delight music lovers in metropolitan drawing-rooms. When there is no favouring breeze a sailor emits a long, weird sound that means "whistling for the wind." Strange! the sails hang idle; we hear that long, entreatying sound; we may hear it at intervals for a considerable time, and, at last, the wind comes!

Persons who make their boat trips in the summer are enraptured with the colour of the landscape, and they may believe that this quality would be less in winter. According to one enthusiast, the Min is never more beautiful in its upper course than on a January day after a snow-storm. Above the gray distant mountains the sky has its brilliance enhanced, but not to a dazzling degree; the contour of the nearest heights is idealized by their pure covering, and in some places the bare soil glows a pale rose tint; the valleys are exquisite tones of green, and the lightly-weighted boughs of the bamboo trees bend with an accentuation of their peculiar grace. These snow storms so near the tropics are of bewitching delicacy, as fleeting and as flimsy as dreams. The falling of the flakes has a tantalizing artificiality that leaves one unsatisfied but delighted. For hours one can watch the contradictory scene. Barefooted sailors aboard, bareheaded peasant women ashore, and,
suggested by your surroundings, you may say that the pleasure you experience does not resemble grosser kinds that are

"Like snowflakes on the river,
A moment white, then gone forever."

If your enthusiasm concerning winter scenery be somewhat disturbed by cold toes and fingers, leave the boat and take a run along the shore. I remember such a jaunt; half-a-dozen young women, each buttoned in several jackets and carrying wraps, started on a brisk walk, and, behind them walked the patient servant. The blood began to tinge the cheeks of the pedestrians: first one dropped a shawl; no matter, coolie would pick it up. The second threw away her top coat; another discarded her cape; all six had soon left the outer rind of winter garments. Ten minutes later the second instalment of wrappings had fallen one after another. The Chinese boy seemed to be a peripatetic clothes rack! In half-an-hour the young ladies were striding along, each wearing only an ordinary walking suit, and the extra rugs, jackets, and shawls came after with the head of the devoted attendant scarcely perceptible above them. This merely shows that the climate is like a warm-hearted person; occasional cool manners do not mean real coldness under the surface.

During that winter voyage, some nights our boat's prow was pushed close in among other boats anchored in some sheltered cove. Then we heard all the intimate sounds of domestic life; the shooting of fire crackers that meant evening devotion; later, the half-awake cry of babies, the mothers' hush, the men's conversation, and often the primitive music of a Chinese violin. Sometimes the strains were from the hand of genius thrilling with a wonderful, wild beauty. At times a shrill voice accompanied the instrument and the sensations of our foreign hearts responded with strange passionate stirrings.

"Do you know the story of the boat people?"

The questioning voice was quaint, with a peculiar accent. It came from a demure little companion, a Chinese girl with an English education. Then she told me in her pretty, bashful way, exactly as if she were reciting from a book, but in so soft a tone that no hearer could be critical: -

"About some hundred years ago there was a Chinese Emperor who had a very dreadful battle with his enemies. He went out to the battle-ground himself and left his two Chief Ministers to take care of his country. But these men were not as faithful as they ought to have been, so, instead of planning how to withstand the enemies, they complied with their request to give them that Emperor's throne. As soon as this was found out, the
Emperor was very angry with them and sent these two families with all their servants to the boats. He made a law that they and their descendants should not be allowed to live on land again. Notwithstanding all this, he died, and this law has not been so strictly observed as when he was alive. But now many of them live on land. At first, they dared not to come up from their watery abode, but tried to move bit by bit, until a few generations after them, when people did not know their origin. They are not allowed to take part in the examinations but they try to have their little sons adopted by land people, and some of them get to be important. I am sorry for them. I wish China would change this law. This is all I can say about them though I have tried to learn more.

The story ended; the music continued; yes, till long after we wished to be asleep!

Sometimes there were sandy beaches where our boat was drawn up to wait for morning. Then we had delicious fears about pirates. Robbers do molest, but generally without more serious results than temporary privation of the travellers' belongings, with a practical demonstration of how the magistrate of the district brings evildoers to justice, and how all the villagers sympathize with the strangers and zealously strive to have their goods restored.

The width of the river varies. Sometimes it spreads into a broad calm pool, and at other times the mountains approach so as to ascend with decided steepness. Thrust a pole downward; you cannot touch bottom! A few miles further, breadth and serenity will be the river's tendency; soon again will come a deep and narrow channel. There is a legend that a traveller going down the Min picked up a pebble every time there were rapids. When he reached Foochow he had five hundred pebbles. There
are many places where the inexperienced voyager thinks he must be dashed against the precipice directly before him, but, when the perilous moment is imminent, as if by magic, the wall seems to swing aside and an open course is revealed. The Needle's Eye, so to speak, is where the rocky banks are only ten feet apart, the waters splash as high as the tallest sailor, and the channel slants so as to make the passage one of great peril. Above this whirlpool a temple is situated where the sailors worship for half-a-day before embarking. So grand is the scenery in this locality that it suggests that fine line from Hebrew poetry—

“He cutteth out rivers among the rocks.”

I am convinced that the boatmen possess considerable piety. Most of them worship Ma Chu, the goddess of sailors, having a picture or statue to represent her, or carry in a prayer bag some ashes from one of her altars in a temple. Once I pointed to her shrine in a boat’s sanctum sanctorum and made light of it. Nothing could have been finer than the reticence and dignity with which the boatman repulsed my levity. Another time, noticing the absence of an idol, I made inquiry as to the omission. The owner of the boat shrugged his shoulders, and said, “All that is of no consequence;” but he was only a half-hearted free-thinker, for his eyes wavered and he had the expression of a naughty boy lacking boldness. In case of shipwreck the mercenary side of the boatmen will be displayed and they will bargain with exasperating deliberation as to the price for which they will save you, supposing, of course, that you have scrambled on to a rock and are in no immediate danger of drowning. If you have enough courage, the best scheme is to drop
into the stream as if exhausted, whereupon anyone of them will save you for nothing, plunging to your relief with impulsive kindness. After having watched how they manage the difficult navigation of their vessels, we rank them with our own pilots and even with our naval heroes.

The tracking over the rapids is always a time of great interest. Some timid travellers prefer to disembark when possible and trust to their own feet and terra firma. Whether one does that or whether one remains aboard it is fascinating to watch the crew. It may be before you know that rapids are ahead that several men will leap into the water and scramble ashore. They wear a simple harness attached to a long rope fastened to the boat. Two men will wade at the prow pushing each at the end of a pole fastened crosswise. The trackers may go far over gravelly places where we hear the boat grate on the river's rough, shallow bed, or they may have to climb up over heaps of great rocks, their slender brown legs showing muscular swellings, and often they may find it necessary to lean forward with excessive effort till their pendant arms touch the ground and they go like quadrupeds straining to the utmost.

Often while your boat strives tediously and laboriously up the river, craft bound for the opposite direction glide past at a dizzy speed.

A gentleman who is not given to exaggeration says that the Upper Min possesses the beauties of the Hudson and of the Rhine. If she has not a Mouse Tower she has her mouse story. In a certain place there is a magnificent rock on a mountain top that resembles a lioness. There she sits in repose gazing over the country like a colossal Egyptian statue. The peasants call her a cat and there are smaller rocks below that, to the rustic imagination, appear to be kittens. The rocks are of a beautiful dull pink with black stripes, which, in weather-beaten dullness, make an excellent imitation of tortoise shell. The peasants declare that for ages five golden mice played in the fields before these feline images. Many Chinese have seen them, but in the year 1896 some foreigners scaled the heights, even climbed to the very top of the cat's head, and since then the mice have been frightened away.

Probably the mountains contain mineral riches. One day a traveller observed peculiar bubbles rising in abundance. He bottled some of the gas, and then putting a match to it, quite as he expected, but much to the natives' astonishment, they saw the water burn!

The Min has her ruins, not lofty, but romantic and exciting to the imagination. The Taipings crossed its upper course and many cities and villages retain scars from their barbarity. Fire and demolition left scattered walls over which nature has thrown drapery of vines and shrubs. These
ruined districts separate the inhabited quarters and impart to the whole an air of lonely sadness.

The lumber business is the one that continues all the year round. The pilot who can boast he never lost a cargo boat is a local hero. The timber merchants are united in a guild and have a business-like arrangement for saving the wrecked wood. At the proper season the cargo boats are packed full of camphor. Then as they pass the air wafts back odours of that pungent, antiseptic tree. At other times tea is the chief export, and then one breathes that fragrance which for years has set Occidental imaginations a-dream picturing all that has been told of the beauty and strangeness of China. With the tea goes the *merkle hua*, a species of jasmine that has a delicious perfume and is used to flavour the tea. Fifty years ago these tea cargoes were veritable argosies of gold, for Fukien held the principal black tea districts and Foochow was the entrepôt of fabulous wealth, but Fortune has always rested her fleeting feet on a wheel and even the Happy Valley could not hold her. Rice is, fortunately, an almost unfailing crop and hundreds of boats contain that practical cargo. Baskets and pottery make picturesque lading. Alas! now the pottery is of the commonest, but it reminds us of what might have been a century ago when the kilns of Kiangsi still retained their skill in making the vases for which China is famous.

Such, as we have attempted to describe it, is our beautiful Min as far south as Ciukau, ninety miles from the sea. Thence begin more civilized circumstances. The sailors still chant their boatsong and whistle for the wind, but there are no more rapids. The tooting and puffing of launches is heard and one could almost believe that the crowds on these little steamers are taking advantage of "excursion rates." Till the present moment no advertisements deface the rockbound shores. O beautiful Min! may we not live to see that!

My first trip to Ciukau was in June. That season is one of great beauty. The colour of the Min is generally like that pale green glaze that is seen on some Chinese porcelain; in certain circumstances it is deepened and intensified to emerald, or diluted and clarified to delicate cobalt. On each side of the pellucid stream rose tier after tier of mountains, the distant ranges purple, the nearest green, fringed with dark pines against the sky, and some of them cultivated in terraces. The stream was a busy highway of travel and trade. Besides all the cargo boats from the upper country there were great rafts of lumber and bamboo. Sometimes one of these had a little house where a family lived, but often one was managed by a lone woman or a child. I saw a small boy stand on a little raft made of a dozen bamboo poles tied together. By means of another pole he directed his course, running
gracefully along his slender craft, his lithe brown body expressing entire self-confidence. We saw many groups of sampans and could study those floating homes, so clean in contrast with land dwellers. The women seem as hardy as the men, and when we were told to observe their head-dress we agreed that their hair knots resembled a conch shell. Some of these people fished from their boats, some had sent their chickens ashore for a good scratching exercise; the family pig, too, was taking an outing. The children, in "suits of tan," were picking up driftwood or gathering mussels. Tiny villages nestled in groves; over them, at meal time, hung a cloud of kitchen incense, and in some elevated nook was sure to be a temple or a shrine with the symbols of sacred devotion. The voyager observed these things as his boat floated along or when it waited a few hours for the tide. For eighty miles the ocean's pulse is felt, and Chinese sailors are too philosophical to oppose it. Often may be seen the cormorants helping their masters to fish, sleepy birds that work automatically and repose sleeping on one foot. That time in June was just at the close of the Dragon Boat Festival. In my mind's eye there is a dragon-boat rowed by twenty children. The long, phantom-like boat was painted along its sides with triangles, alternately red and blue. One boy at the stern used a rudder quite as long as the boat itself; it was also painted red and blue. In the midst a boy played a drum, and another at the bow played cymbals. All the others worked short paddles splashing the water in a joyous fury. They were all naked, like beautiful little devils. They passed us quickly but remained in sight for a long while, receding farther and farther away, till they and their boat were merely a gray line in the opaline stretch of water.

To adequately depict the country of the Min requires the brush of a colourist. Words cannot make you realize the quality of the atmosphere. Everything that is brilliant glows; all things else melt in soft harmony. Along the river's bank can be seen many wild flowers. In June white lilies bloom. They are tall and stately, sumptuous flowers of the Orient; ancestors
of what in temperate climes are known as annunciation lilies; those so waxen and cold, these larger and of a tropic richness, white on the petals' inner sides but tawny without. The pollen is not pale yellow, but orange, crimson, and purple.

The tributary that may be called the Min's best beloved child is the Yuen-fu. If you have a mind or body diseased, take a trip on the Yuen-fu in one of Foochow's commodious houseboats. The scenery is like the Min except that everything is less workaday. There will be native boats in sight, but they seem to be for the mere purpose of adding animation to the picturesque. One September it was my good fortune to make the jaunt in company with an artist. She would often grow eloquent, but more frequently her only words were, "This is a dream, a dream"; and then she would murmur, "All round the coast the languid air did swoon."

Near Foochow the river is so wide, there are so many ranges of mountains with mist wreaths between, that one might be in a sea with mountainous islands or among the lakes in the north of Italy. At half-past four that September afternoon the lowering sun threw into relief every inequality of the hills on one shore. Every bush was bordered with glowing green and the terraces were as distinct as stairways. On the other shore, details were obscured and there were only grand, suave lines. In the west toward which we sailed there was a white glory! Pearly gray and silvery gray against a sky so dazzling that one's eyelids fell before so great a flood of shining. Five ranges of mountains in differing tints of veiled pearl, and the wooded banks at the water's edge were like gray lacework.

The twilight was a time of exquisite poesy; near the horizon topaz, with a blush above; those tints reflected in the water; the foliage on the shores black, and the mountains of stone gray, looming up in different degrees of grandeur. Then one or two large stars appeared as if just created. They grew in splendour and a host of lesser lights followed. As an hour passed the colours faded and all was mysterious gloom. The boat was anchored; the silence was delicious; only the swish of the waves. No more entire repose is imaginable.

In the night, a favouring wind sprang up and the thrifty sailor unfurled the sails and, while sleeping, we were wafted miles up the stream. No longer one could doubt whether we were in a sea of islands or among lakes in a mountain range. That was a river with heights like those of the Hudson when it was discovered, wooded, wild, rocky. At far intervals could be seen a blue-coated peasant felling a fir tree. Just a little above the water's edge on one side was a level bank with a narrow thoroughfare on which busy peasants passed to and fro. There were the large-footed field-women, swinging
along with a grand gait, their heads poised nobly, the tan on their shoulders carrying gay-coloured parcels or picturesque baskets. Sometimes processions of workmen went with their tools; loudly they called to one another, or to other pedestrians half hidden in bundles of fagots. Their voices mingled with the warble of birds that sang with a bright freedom which expressed their large, safe existence.

Nature is the master artist for vistas, composition, and arrangement. These high-sounding words are man’s invention; he has observed nature and named her processes. Imagine a group of huts, five in pleasing disorder; a zigzag path leads to the water, where there are some sampans with their curved covers and sails that collapse like folding fans; straw-stacks stand in their conical grace, and a blue smoke issues from the chimney. Up behind is a bamboo grove bending its feathery tops; up higher the stones wet by a shallow stream gleam as they catch the sunshine. There are glimpses of it up toward the summit where the outline of the hill is distinct against a cloudless blue sky. At short intervals are clusters of trees, little groves each of one kind; tall, pointed fir trees, then at a distance that other kind with bare trunks and tops like umbrellas. A peculiar sound over our heads caused us to seek the source. Ah! a cascade, broken between dark rocks fringed with sombre foliage; three foaming falls, tumbling in a turbulent mass, breaking and spreading into misty veils; when we were almost too far past to hear the splash it seemed to grow clearer. We looked to the opposite heights. Far up was another stream perceptible in many meanderings; it reached a precipice over which its waters tumbled, gurgling, gushing, and then

"Like a downward smoke,
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go,
And some through wavering lights and shadows broke,
Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below."

But how inadequate are descriptions! Only a few miles beyond the rugged heights that were in a wild condition, there are fields of corn, rice, and
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hemp. The valley between the pleated hills is all terraces. A village appears; low huts richly shaded by bastard banyan trees, each one the shape of a monstrous bouquet. The villagers can be seen occupied by many simple industries and the children run down the several stone stairways looking at us and talking about us. But the human interest predominates only temporarily; we sail on between lonely shores glowing with wild orchids, red and yellow, and on the right and left, against the sky, is the irregular outline of lofty hills, and in the distance whence we came and whither we are going the peaks melt away in soft aerial perspective. The afternoon passes, day declines; just as the sun sinks the new moon rises, and mountains, water, and sky are rose-tinted gray.

But the highest degree of beauty is not possible without associations of sadness and tragedy. The Min has these. Until custom has staled the niceness of our impressions, no one can see the thousands of graves on the hillsides without melancholy musings. Each represents what was once a person with needs and interests like our own. Each sepulchre in the form of Omega symbolizes the end of things, and, in spite of surrounding beauty, this memento mori recalls words which, in due time, will be spoken of us. “The memory of them is forgotten. Also their love and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished: neither have they any more a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun.” Sometimes may be seen devoted descendants embellishing the tomb, or there may be heard a lone woman wailing for the dead, a sound that, true or perfunctory, is one of the most heartrending things in the world.

Saddest of all is the tragedy of life, and nowhere is it more strikingly exhibited than on the Foochow Bridge. In whatever way you regard it, the Bridge of Ten Thousand Ages is a marvel. It is a quarter-of-a-mile long and fourteen feet wide, connecting the island of Nantia with Foochow; built eight hundred years ago without cement, held together only by the fitness and weight of the parts. There are forty buttresses at unequal distances, and massive stone sleepers reach from one to the other. Nantia is the island suburb inhabited by Europeans. As you enter the bridge from that direction you meet the inevitable shrine, and the ubiquitous stone lions—these of archaic sculpture. Then in the dense throng passing back and forth one may observe an epitome of Chinese life. It is like London Bridge according to the old song, except that here misery reaches depths and grandeur attains barbaric splendour unknown in a Christian land. O, the beggars! in rags and squalor; blind, lame, leprous; some of them little children, some of them very old. Pompous mandarins in jewels and gold with all the ostentation of civil and warlike display. Fine ladies, painted and powdered, peeping from their
sedan chairs. Great sturdy peasant women and the boat-women walking, happily, with natural feet. Burden-bearers groaning under crushing loads. Idol processions with their confusion of grotesque sights and discordant sounds. Soldiers in their sinister black uniforms. Country people bringing fresh vegetables, and gardeners bearing on their heads enormous round trays heaped up with flowers, roses, lilies, chrysanthemums, according to the season, in delicious masses of colour that are like sweet notes of melody in the harsh and dolorous tumult. For a long time any day in passing over the bridge one could see the dead or dying; some poor wretch in his last convulsion, or a pallid corpse scarcely covered with a piece of matting. Recently a lodge has been built adjoining the bridge where expiring misery can have a shelter.

But tragic as is the bridge, it needs only certain atmospheric conditions and a proper distance to become of exquisite value in the landscape. The smaller vessels pass under; many large junks are always grouped below it, their long scarlet streamers glowing in serpentine folds. Later than sunset in this region there is generally an afterglow that flushes the sky to the zenith, sometimes until eight o'clock. On such evenings the scene is charming; the mountains are like dreams, every object is idealized, and the air is as if full of gold dust.

Seven miles north there is another antique bridge with an equally romantic name—the Bridge of the Cloudy Hills. The heights south of Nantai command an extensive view, including the surrounding mountains, the river on both sides of the island, the two fine old bridges, and Foochow, from the midst of which gleams the white pagoda.

From Foochow to the sea is thirty-five miles. All kinds of water craft ply the stream; the native sampans, little fishing smacks with their white or ruddy sails, the luxurious houseboats, and ocean steamers laden with the world's merchandise. There are beautiful mountains in all directions; some of the slopes have a hundred cultivated terraces. I assure you it is a grand trip to go from Foochow to the sea on high tide! The wind blows, the sails
swell, we race, we are tossed lightly, there is excitement. The mountains skip like rams and the little hills like lambs. The waves, sometimes, collect and give the boat a great slap, they splash overboard and then the swish recurs regularly. We feel the throb of the ocean and smell its delicious freshness. On we go! Our way becomes calmer, grander. We know not when we have reached the sea.

Who will agree that all men are alike!

But may we not liken the course of a beautiful river to the career of a great and good man? The bright, sportive youth, the active, useful maturity, and then—

"Such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home."