

ALLERMUIR.

BY FRED. R. COLES.

THE charge is often brought against the modern city dweller that he misses the beautiful that lies close to his very door. The globe-trotter, the motorist, the cyclist, go, or rather are borne, so far away now-a-days with all the speed of their respective machines, that they turn up the nose of scorn and raise the supercilious eyebrow of well-bred astonishment, if, haply, a plain pedestrian begins a tale of some little ramble within the absurd distance of five miles from our Scottish capital.

Yet, verily there were two of us, who, a few days ago, in the teeth of a damp sou' wester and in defiance of all well-intended counsels, rambled off to the—will the insignificant hill-name bear the publicity?—well, just the Pentlands; and saw sights such as I trow few of the globe-trotters ever saw (for they have no time for Nature's secrets) and none of the stay-at-homes, gossiping away the idle hours by the enervating asbestos-nook, could see, be their dreams never so romantic!

To follow the charmingly-winding declivitous path from near Comiston Drive to the farm and house of Comiston and so to the main road near Swanston Loaning is one of the many pleasant rambles evidently much in vogue on a Sunday afternoon in summer. But to keep your footing on the same path, when the snow lies frozen and then slightly thawed, and breasting all the while a full-bodied breeze that seems to rush out at you as if challenging your audacity—why, who would be such a fool as to call that pleasure.

We two did—and we meant a good deal more, and we did that, too. For diverging at the base of the Swanston Brae sharply to the right, we presently struck across the fields, assaulted the steep fort-like hillock beyond west of Stevenson's house, and then, setting foot on the brink of

the Hare Burn, tracked it up to its source in the very bosom—frozen and snowy, and unmaternal, as it looked amid the rocks and heather—of Allermuir.

The burn was in grand spate, and, rushing down clear and pellucid, strove its baby utmost to break asunder the sheeny bars which King Frost had bound, in all manner of fantastic forms, across its bed and for many feet on either bank. Even the first few score yards of this semi-frozen semi-rushing stream were replete with the most exquisite shapes in clear ice; here a row of separately-frozen rush-stems drooped over, kissing the little wavelets, some scimitar-curved, some straight and broad and pointed, like the dagger of Lady Macbeth, some serrated all along the under edge like a silver saw; at other places there stood up rows of miniature organ-pipes, "the mute inglorious Miltons" of this Arctic symphony! Again, in whole spaces of what, a few weeks ago, was the overtrickling of some tiny tributary, now great rounded bosses and muscle-like masses lay, glittering in the morning sunshine as if they were the petrified biceps and deltoids of some mighty Son of Anak chained below and struggling upwards into life!

All these, however, were the mere prelude to the Ice-Symphony King Frost had written a little higher up amid the dark recesses of this wonderful streamlet.

At a point so comparatively near the summit of our little Mid Lothian Alp that the air—less boisterous now—was perceptibly colder, a narrow cleft occurs, which, in the drought of summer, would scarcely be observed for any reason except that on a specially hot day its cliffy sides make for coolness and shade; its side, on the west, may be some seventy or eighty feet long as it flanks the stream, and in height some eighteen or twenty feet—an utterly insignificant precipice indeed. But, to-day, the jagged rocky front is glorified, fairer than the Queen of Sheba, in the bewilderingly fantastic splendour of the ice-fairyland clothing it from summit to base. You lean back on the eastern side of rock, your feet not too securely set on the fast dampening smooth frozen edge of the stream, and

almost within arm's reach there spreads out, above, and away on both sides, this magnificent frontage of frost-work. From the grassy edge aloft there hang long pendants of ice of the shape of a Swiss Horn, the mouth at the top and the whole body of them an amazing *diminuendo* in grey to the final tip which sparkles diamond-like and keen. Scores of such pendants fringed the brink. The broadest mass bulged outwards and receded inwards, just as the roughness of the rock beneath compelled the slow-dripping hill moisture when it was in emotion; and where the ice, everywhere all but solid, actually touched and lay encrusted upon the rock, it shone absolutely like the most brilliant silver ever imagined.

Still more strange was the sight to our unaccustomed eyes of the constant downward fall of bubbles and drops of water chasing each other every few seconds irregularly across the rock surface, six inches or more beneath this solid veil of ice, and having the appearance of little dark beetles scampering away in a harum-scarum flight. This particular phenomenon we don't remember seeing noticed any where. It was of course the result of a sudden thaw then rapidly proceeding during our ramble on the 17th. Had we confronted this rock on Saturday evening, the ice-masses alone—beautiful as they are—would have rewarded us; had we postponed our ramble till Monday, the underlying surface of the ice would all have been thawed into one continuous and therefore invisible flow. But, reaching our rocky fairyland just at the hour we did, our eyes were gladdened by the vision of one of these mysterious inner secrets of which Nature is so prolific, and yet into which so few of us, in those prosaic, whirligig days, ever get the chance of peeping.

It was hard to tear ourselves away from the fascination of those little drops of water sliding swiftly along beneath their icy roof; they seemed like messengers from a world just "beyond the veil," to tell poor plodding man that his little bubble-life, too, will soon be lost in the stream that flows ever seawards, and that he had better make the most of his career while he can.

After this, although there was a strenuous delight in treading the snow-drifted slopes of Allermuir and skidding down them on the return, in losing our bearings (for ten minutes) in a whirl of ghostly mist as we searched for Caerketton, and in plunging down the last steep hill near Swanston wood, no such treasure, so personal, so unimaginable, so novel as the above, remained as a gift from Nature herself to be kept and pictured for all the rest of memory and life.