

Our English Page

Värmland's Waterway Klarälven and its Valley.

By Ane Randell.

Part 2.

However — the valley is most beautiful as it is, with its variety of cultivated ground and endless woods which climb the mountains, as it seems, without interruption, far up into Norway in the one direction, and descend as far as to Siljan's country in the other.

Close to the border of the Finnskoga woods, I have found a synthesis of all the most beautiful of Sweden. You find it round Vingasjön and on the small green islets in the swamps along the river; but there are no manor-houses to be seen in the country of peasants' houses and extensive woods. Sometimes you believe yourself to be in Dalecarlia, and this is not so strange; the twin province is lying so near, and Dalälven's geological structure does not differ so very much from that of Klarälven. You find the same high banks where the swallows fly to their nests built in the ground. You find here the same transparent blue air, where the valley bends southward, the same brilliant play of the light when the shadows from the clouds glide across the soft carpet of the tree-tops in the woods. And when you climb the mountains and walk one mile or two upwards and far away on narrow stony paths, where only a horse laden with provisions can pass, or when you see a girl standing in the firelight baking waffles of shredded oatmeal, then you feel at home; it looks just like a picture by Zorn or Emerik Stenberg which has come to life.

And it is strange to see that the level places beside the river, which broaden out between its regular windings, remind you of the flattest of all flat land: Uppland. But then you must close your eyes to the ubiquitous mountains that you can not help seeing behind the next hill, because the wooded hills are the dominant note in this rich chord that the landscape plays. If you were brought here blindfolded in an airplane and were landed at the foot of Branäsberget, you would call out: "Norrländ." That is, Norrländ before you reach the mountain region. But in the evening, when the sun is setting in the north and seems to make the strangely formed mountains in North Finnskoga dissolve into pure light, so that you lose the sense of distance, then you do not need to make the reservation, "before you reach the mountain region." You feel that you are in Norrländ and the skyline is

formed by blue-red mountains. The evening chill comes suddenly and makes the temperature fall about ten degrees within an hour. The enchantment is complete; you are in the north of Hälsingeland or Ångermanland and not in the same latitude as Zorn's Moracountry.

I also know, though others who have travelled still farther north, that the barren landscape around the marshes on Klarälven's highland do not remind you of anything else so much as the vegetation around Lapland's marsh-lakes; cloudberry and cranberry ripen here, and dwarf birches and osiers grow close to the earth, and various immigrants from the mountain flora are blooming.

From my hut on a high plateau far up in Syssleback, I have a wide view to the south over the valley; and when I look out over the joy of summer, not caring for the mountains' frown, then I understand that it is a dangerous land. I understand why I nearly always receive the same reply when, with money and kind words, I try to obtain some of the food products in Älvdalen, it may be cloudberry, genuine goat-cheese, or shredded oatmeal. When I point to seemingly unnecessary large winter provisions of mörör (cloudberry), I receive the reply: "But remember the long, long winter and the extreme isolation from the outside world."

I am thinking of the long endless winter and of the unspeakable loneliness. Consider that the sun during the winter cannot rise over the mountain peaks and that it shines for only a few minutes! Let the howling snowstorm sweep over the mountain peaks; I close my eyes and begin to understand. I understand why Selma Lagerlöf has written about Värmland's wild land, where people become either mad or drunkards. Nature here is without sun and warmth, and endless woods separate the people from the nearest railroad. Nature is so mighty and dreadful that it turns man into an animal or a madman.

And there are plenty of such men in this neighborhood. If they do not become insane, they become freakish or hermits who try to put a stop to every attempt to get new fresh blood and new life into Älvdal. And from the cult of Bacchus I hear things touching both the tragic and the grand: the saga atmosphere of Gösta Berling and his comrades comes a reality. Here especially in Ofvansjöbygd, the po-

et's idealized tales have come true. In spite of all restrictions or perhaps just because of them, the drink demon walks about; he could tell about tragedies in marriages, about houses, farms, and woods that have been drunk up and gambled away, about women who silently suffer martyrdom; he could tell about scandals which elsewhere would cry to Heaven; but here they never reach outside the valley. If you were going to write about your experiences with the people in Älvdalen, you would have nothing to tell about juries and murder trials, and this should be credited to the good-humor of the people in this valley; only when the Finn blood has been excited, is there a chance of hearing of such things.

The people in Älvdalen drink to gain oblivion and to make their souls feel an interior sun shining on them. They fall over veranda-rails and down river banks, but they seldom kill themselves, and they let others live until they suffer a premature death through tuberculosis or through too much drinking.

But it is a pity that such splendid human material should perish; it is unexcelled Swedish stock which is attacked by disease. Älvdalen's men and their wives are worth looking at; not the deepest degradation can rob the sharply cut faces of their intelligent and powerful expression, which has been inherited by the great peasant families through centuries of conflict with nature.

A resident of Stockholm understands what it would mean if one of the most beautiful places in Sweden were connected with the railroads of the country; people in the capital would be able to proceed to Värmland's Älvdal in the same period of time that would take them to reach Siljansbygd. The supply of provisions is at present so bad in Älvdalen that we must repeat the words that once were said about Småland's inns, "that you can eat very well there if you bring plenty of provisions yourself." This cannot be said about the inn in Höljes in North Finnskoga, where I had a luxurious dinner for two kronor; and this in the years after the war when food was very expensive and scarce in Sweden: smörgåsar, filbunke of the thickest cream, fresh grilled grayling and trout, stewed cloudberry, lager-beer, and coffee.

But generally the tourist is wise in bringing plenty of provisions when proceeding to Älvdalen. There is scarcely anything to be bought for money, and only if you know some people and have cultivated their acquaintance, you can obtain your requirement of butter, potatoes, and eggs. But the hospitality is unlimited, and if you drive to church on Sunday, it may happen, as it did to me, that you do not return home for a week; in the meantime you have been taken care of in houses on both sides of the river; and you return with a beard longer than that of the patriarchs — because naturally you do not bring razors with you when you go to church.

The question of attracting tourists to this province has

two sides. The railroad would bring tourist hotels and a stream of gold to the valley. But the demoralization of this proud, dignified people, whom you like when you come to know them, is an evil which you do not wish to befall your friends of an unforgettable summer visit; you have seen in Dalecarlia so much of the people's demoralization through tourists that it frightens you. You feel psychologically compelled to be truthful, but the matter must be considered from a medical point of view also, and the reasons in favor of the railroad weigh so heavily that one does not hesitate; the project must not fail. New fresh blood must be infused into the people of the valley, lest this intelligent population succumb to degeneration.

Dalby parish is one of the richest in the province. The only fact which reveals the approach of a new time in the parish is the contempt prevailing against the old peasant houses; these small red, one-story houses, which were so strongly constructed and had so much character, have slowly been replaced by large, ugly buildings; and these have been given a kind of dirty-looking yellow color which tries to imitate the color of manor-houses, but it does not look clean and is far from a success. But the old well-constructed outhouses remain untouched and remind you of good old traditions.

In this narrow valley there is no room for any real farming except to supply what is strictly necessary for each family; there has consequently developed a kind of peasant-aristocracy which regards the educated people as inferior. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that a man from Älvdalen only nods his head to salute a person, or when he is very polite he says, "How do you do?" in a singing, curt accent; but he never raises his hat to anybody. Along with the accumulating of fortunes, along with the growth of the woods and the bank account, the family egotism has grown. The money and the timber, which latter is the origin of all fortune in this province, must not go out of the family; as a consequence most marriages take place between relatives, with the wellknown symptoms of degeneration as, for instance, hereditary deafness in certain families. Again the curse of fortune has thus proven to be true. Another consequence is the peasants' slowness in approving of reforms. The people in Älvdalen are, however, not stingy; rather the contrary, and hospitality is an unwritten law that all take pride in following. But no sooner have the very rich peasants assembled at a meeting to discuss the interests of the parish, than they hold tight to the pocketbook and retard settlement of the questions as long as possible. It is strange that this province must confess with shame that in the organization of their public schools they are far behind other parts of Sweden; the types of school-buildings are inferior, and they have half-day courses, itinerant schools, and too few teachers. These facts make the work very dreary and hopeless for those who are employed in

this large uncultivated and isolated land.

The people are also very very reluctant to develop the small and utterly primitive parish hospital; this unwillingness of theirs is, perhaps without their knowing it, due to their wealth. If the wife or daughter of a rich peasant — and all peasants are rich here — suddenly gets bloodpoisoning or peritonitis, then he either takes her in his own automobile or spends some hundred kronor to have her taken to the hospital in Karlstad or Filipstad to be operated on. And if the daughter should get tuberculosis, he pays for firstclass accommodation for her at a sanatorium, and he can well afford to do so.

Consequently these people find that there is no need for either an operating room or a sanatorium in Dalby parish, which is afflicted with tuberculosis to a tragic degree. Those who cannot afford to run an automobile, or to pay for the care in the sanatorium, are doomed. It is part of the peasant culture, otherwise so proud, that if the house is ever so large and the bank account ever so high, the whole family lives in one room. The other rooms are intended for guests or to show off, and nobody ever enters them in everyday life. One understands, then, that the germs are well off in such close quarters, where the windows are nailed down and cannot be opened, though outside is the purest, balmy air from the woods and the mountains.

My analysis has reached its highest and final point and I must start home. After having inquired by telephone at all places of significance along the river, I was at last successful in learning the approximate time when a motorboat towing a lighter was expected to call on its way down the river. And in this part of the world, it is a great favor to be accommodated on a lighter. I left my hut in Syssleback on an early morning at three o'clock, and a small Värmland horse pulled my carriage for three and a half miles through the moon-flooded landscape to Älvdalen where I boarded the lighter; such a drive is one of the things that make a poor human life richer.

The dimness melts away; the stars, one by one, hide themselves under the rosy fingers of dawn, and the sun struggles to escape the clasp of the river-fox. The western mountains are taking on a red color.

Loyalty

I'd serve my prince,
I'd serve him with my fortune
here at home,
And serve him with my person
in his wars;
Watch for him, fight for him,
bleed for him,
Die for him, as ev'ry true-
born loyal subject ought.
— Otway.

A True Friend

A true friend is one who makes us do what we can: — Pheips.

Tears

Tears never yet wound up a clock or worked a steam engine. — Wise Sayings.