The Source of the Ancient Mariner

James Ivor
THE SOURCE
of
"THE ANCIENT MARINER."

BY

IVOR JAMES,
Registrar of the University College of South Wales and
Monmouthshire,

CARDIFF:
DAVID OWEN AND COMPANY, LIMITED.
1899.
THE SOURCE
OF
"THE ANCIENT MARINER."

Is the poem of "The Ancient Mariner"—
in its design, main scope, and moral—original,
or was the idea, in the main, borrowed from
some source which has escaped the notice of
the critics for the greater part of a century?
The originals, said Emerson, are not
original; in a hundred years millions of men,
and not a hundred lines of poetry. De
Quincey assured his readers that he had dis-
covered the germ of "The Ancient Mariner"
in the story of the shooting of the albatross
in Shelvoke's voyages. For proof he
referred to Wordsworth, "a man of
stern versality," who, we are told,
had declared to De Quincey it was
notorious that Coleridge had derived "from
The Source of

the very passage cited "the original hint for the action of the poem. Could it have been imagined, asks De Quincey somewhat sarcastically, that Coleridge "would see cause utterly to disown so slight an obligation to Shelvocke"? Coleridge, it seems, had been saying some unpleasant things about De Quincey, who, not unnaturally, perhaps, in the circumstances, was glad of an opportunity, as he thought at the time, to give his ungrateful friend a slap in return. Coleridge, who disowned Shelvocke, kept from De Quincey all knowledge of the source of the poem. It may have been his desire to hide the source altogether.

But De Quincey appealed to Wordsworth, and "the man of stern versality" years afterwards, through his MS. notes, gave a final and unexpected answer. The poem, says Wordsworth, was founded, not on the albatross incident at all, but "on a dream, as Mr. Coleridge said of his friend Mr. Cruikshank." The point of the dream, omitted, curiously enough, from the notes, is supplied by Dyce, who states, though on Wordsworth's authority, that the dreamer fancied he had seen a "skeleton ship with