

A HILL WALK IN NORWAY.

BY JOHN GEDDIE.

NORWAY is only eighteen hours' sail from the headquarters of the Cairngorm Club. Its nearest fjords open gates of access to some of the finest mountaineering grounds in Scandinavia; and one can get to the foot of the Folgefond almost as soon as to the crown of Ben Muich Dhui, and with far less trouble. A few notes on a walk which a friend and I took across a section of the fjelds of Southern Norway, which can be reached with peculiar ease from Aberdeen, may be of service in encouraging others to follow in our steps, and thus enjoy, in addition to the other manifold pleasures of Norwegian travel, an experience of hill climbing which will give zest to excursions nearer home. I had convinced myself in the previous summer that Baedeker is egregiously wrong in his dictum that Norway is not a country for pedestrians; and discovered that the round trip with the North of Scotland and Orkney and Shetland Company's steamers through the fjords can be pleasantly varied by walks, and even by some hill work, in the choicest parts of the west coast. An eager desire then aroused to put this opinion to more severe proof had a good deal to do with the fact that, on 27th July, 1892, my companion (Mr. W. Drummond Young, artist) and I found ourselves at Borte, in Telemarken, in the very centre of Southern Norway, preparing to leave the beaten paths, and to take *paa Heia*—to the hills.

Thus far we had come by road and water, the most memorable incidents of our journey from Christiania being a pleasant interview with Dr. Nansen at Lysaker; a survey of the Polar ship "Fram", lying on the stocks at Rekevik, near Laurvig; the voyage up an enchanted lake—the Farris Vand, and the exploration of the beautiful valley beyond—the Slemdal, which reminded us of the finest part of Upper Deeside. We had tried to carry out Mr. Matthews Williams' directions, in "Through Norway with a Knapsack",

having a shirt to wear and a shirt to wash, with results that were comical rather than encouraging; and we had met with many helpful people and agreeable adventures. Our last stage had been from Dalen, at the head of the Bandaks-canal navigation; and we reached Borte Hotel, fifteen miles, early in the afternoon, our intention being to strike off here from the road which, a little further on, joins the main route across Southern Norway by the Haukelid's Fjeld, and to follow the Bortedal ten miles to the highest of its *saeters*, or summer shielings, at Hestehomene. From this, and from our idea of proceeding by way of Brevig to the Suldals Vand (a vicinity familiar to visitors to Western Norway), without the aid of a guide, we were dissuaded by the excellent landlord at Borte, Mr. Nilsen. Nor had we reason to repent of changing our minds when we had opportunity afterwards of examining the nature of *saeter* accommodation, and had experience of the way and of the companionship of our trusty *Tolk*, Od Odsen, of Nordbö. Mr. Nilsen, who speaks English well, and whose hostelry is as pretty and comfortable a halting-place as the traveller need wish, pointed out to us that, by making an early start, we could easily cover the distance of nearly thirty miles to Brevig in one stage; and so we tarried overnight, nothing loath, to enjoy the beautiful sunset effects as evening fell on the crystal Borte lake and its steep enclosing hills—to say nothing of the famous *fiske-boller-i-humeroos* (fish balls with lobster sauce) of this inn, which Mr. Goodman, in his “Best Tour”, has praised none too highly.

The start was not made quite so early as we intended, and it was seven o'clock before we were fairly afoot in the narrow valley of the Borte river. We had lightened ourselves of all articles of clothing that could be spared, and sent them round to meet us on the high road in a parcel which, owing to an accident to the label, afterwards hunted us through Western Norway, and finally caught us up as we were stepping on board our steamer at Bergen. Overcoats and other wraps had already been sent round before us by sea, in spite of the remonstrances of our Christiania friends, who assured us that we would perish of cold on

the fjelds. The only complaint we had to make of the weather, even at the highest altitudes, was that it was too warm. In addition to one light knapsack, we carried a small Kodak.

A hill track in Norway (as in the Scottish Highlands) is much easier to see on the map than in nature. This through the Bortedal was rough enough, and the one thing more difficult than keeping it seemed to be finding it after it was lost. All this, however, we could leave to the *Tolk*. Not the least of the advantages of having a guide is that it enables you to enjoy the surroundings without being troubled with intruding cares about losing the way. In the valley, of course, it was not possible to go far wrong, and, higher up, in the waste reaches of tableland, there are the *vaerks*, or cairns of stones, placed to direct the traveller. My opinion was that, barring mist and snowstorm, we should have managed to hit off our line, and reach our destination. My companion, on the other hand, was convinced that we should infallibly have gone astray. His is the safer notion to act upon in a country where there is no human dwelling for twenty miles.

The Bortedal is enclosed on the south—our left hand—by the range of the Kvan Fjeld, and on the opposite side by the fine rugged cliffs and slopes of the Bruggene and the Borte Heiene, all rising over the 4000 feet line, and plentifully patched and streaked with snow. In the depression between the two latter masses we fancied that we caught a glimpse of the white summit of the Store Midt Fjeld, which reaches a height of 4600 feet. Two hours' walking brought us to the first snow in the valley. It formed a *sne-bro* (a bridge) over the stream in a narrow defile, just below where the Borte dashed in a waterfall over the rocks; and here, to the horror of the guide, we enjoyed a delicious bath and *douche*, afterwards cooling ourselves in the indigo-blue depths of the ice grotto. A little further on is the *saeter* station of Home.

Families and flocks at this season have moved up to these higher pastures, and an idyllic group of *saeter* women and children, cattle, and sheep, gathered about us, full of

wonder and benevolent curiosity. We halted at the last of these temporary habitations in the valley, Hestehomene, for our mid-day meal; and the kindly hands of the guid-wife and her daughter were soon engaged in preparing fragrant coffee, while huge wooden cogs of *flöte*, a kind of clotted cream, were set on the ground before us. Round this we sat on stools, and scooped up the contents of the bickers with fragments of *flatbrod*, or with daintily carved wooden skimmers. The fare was primitive, but satisfying, and the welcome hearty; and it was with renewed strength that we held on to the summit of the watershed, coasting desolate lochans with margins strewn with boulders, or fringed with melting ice and snow, and picking our way along the shoulders and across the spurs of the hills with the help of the friendly *vaerks*. A good deal of snow was lodged on the divide, near the 3500 feet line, between the Bortedal and the basin of the Otteraa. On the top a magnificent prospect burst upon us. Along the western and round to the northern horizon, rose ranges of snow-covered summits, marking in the former direction the distant margin of the tableland, towards the Rykfylde fjords. To the north there was a haze in the atmosphere, as from fires; but the most outstanding peaks, Vasdals-eggen, 5765 feet, overlooking Haukelid's Saeter, and the nearer Selsnut and Laage Fjeld were plain to see. The ground fell away gently—a monotonous tableland covered near at hand by grey reindeer moss; but dark shadows indicated the course of the Otteraa river, here close to its sources, and in the middle distance was the isolated form of Galten, a capital mark by which to steer on our way to the river. A path branches off to the south-east under the snowy Braud Fjeld, towards the Botnedal and Mo, which we had passed on our previous day's walk. The bare fjeld in front of us is pastured by herds of reindeer, but neither on this, nor on the following day, were we able to get a glimpse of the *rener*, or of their Lapp herdsmen, although footprints on the snow and moss showed that they had been over this ground at an earlier hour.

No sign of the presence of man or even a tree was to

be descried in this desolate landscape until we had descended some distance the little stream draining to the Otteraa and approached the main river, which is here some 3000 feet above sea level and over 200 miles from its mouth at Christiansand. Where we struck it, it was running in a broad and rapid but shallow current of ice-cold water, and in this state of the stream might easily be forded to the *saeter* hut of Hofden, thus saving a fatiguing bit of road. The stones in its bed, however, as we abundantly tested by bathing in it, are remarkably slippery. We continued down the stream, skirting a dead pine forest, whose naked limbs reminded us of skeleton trees we had seen in Glen Derry and Glen More, and crossing by a wooden bridge over a raging fall, pursued our way laboriously along an old moraine strewn with boulders and covered with coppice, right glad at length to come suddenly, through a gap in the hill, upon Brevig, a picturesque group of old wooden buildings scrambling up the hillside overlooking its lake.

Brevig is a mountain hostel as well as a *gaard*. Glancing over the pages of the Visitors' Book it could be seen that a thin stream of tourist traffic flows past it. There are rough mountain paths to the Haukelid high road, to the head of the Lyse Fjord, and down the Saetersdal, as well as to Borte and to Roalquam, on the Suldal Lake. Rarely do our countrymen come this way; but it happened that, luckily for us, an Englishman had lighted on Brevig the previous night on a fishing excursion; and we shared the fine dish of trout he had caught in the lake. Otherwise the fare was rough and plain enough. The *gaard* is an old one handed down from father to son through many generations. The buildings—*staburs*, woodsheds, byres, stables, and farm-houses, old and new—seemed to have been arrested while dancing a wild jig down to the water's edge, and their quaint gables projected in all directions. The woodwork of the more ancient of the dwelling-houses, which had the date 1691 (I think) carved above the doorway, was as black as bog oak with the weather. Within were strange specimens of old-fashioned Norwegian furniture, ranges of wonderful bedsteads, painted, in strong blues and reds, with pious

inscriptions and family records ; venerable chairs, stools, and kitchen, farm, and sporting utensils. Stowed away in a loft, we came upon curious old chests, painted with characteristic Telemark designs. Evidently the old order had begun to give place to the new ; the fragments of one of the antique bedsteads were propped against one of the walls, ready to be made into firewood. But change can only come by slow degrees to Brevig. The nearest road for wheels is twenty miles off, down the Otteraa ; the children have to go thirteen or fourteen miles each way to school, and, of course, can only attend during the winter months, when they can use their *skis* or snowshoes. All around the place looked green and flourishing, in spite of the great elevation. The mass of the Stejne-hei looked down from a height of 1500 feet on the opposite shore of the lake, and at its upper end flashed more than one white waterfall.

But the mosquitos were in millions, and bit ferociously.

Up at an early hour, refreshed by a sound sleep, we started briskly to cover the 27 miles across the Meien Fjeld to the Suldal. There is a marvellous exhilaration in the mountain air at this height, and the steep climb through brushwood and heather to the top of the ridge at the further end of the lake was taken at a good pace. Mr. Logie Robertson's lines in his "Norwegian Sonnets", allowing for the fact that we did not, like him, outrise the sun and were fifty or sixty miles higher up the valley, describe our feelings and our experiences :—

"Steep was the climb from Vallé ; far below
 The Saeter we had left lay bathed in mist,
 And still the height rose higher than we wist
 Above the ravings of the Otteraa.
 And now a thin bleak wind began to blow,
 And now the bridle path to turn and twist,
 Here round a *taern* by summer never kissed
 And there behind a hide of hoarded snow.
 The stars dissolved anon ; and airy trills
 Of wavering music showed the day begun.
 We toiled to meet the morn, o'er rocks, o'er rills,
 And breathless, but at last, our wish we won—
 The top, and lo ! a countless herd of hills
 Tossing their shining muzzles in the sun".

The trail, partly owing to the circumstance that ponies had been over it on the previous day, was much more clearly marked than that from Borte. The two spots shown on the map at Nystol and Fiskebek have no longer any existence, except as ruined *saeter* huts. The stream issuing from the Vaerings Vand is crossed by a bridge, and a little farther on we came to Vaerings Saeter. In fact we nosed it almost as soon as we saw it, and we found the little hovel of sod and timber festooned with the offal of reindeer. The door was open, but the Lapp occupants were absent on the more distant fells. Round the desolate margin of the Vaering, and other lakes, we toiled, always moving upwards, and by and by our mark became the Runde Nut, a prominent *arête* on the slope of the Meien Fjeld. We crossed a large field of snow, and ascended by the left shoulder of the peak, past a series of small lochs, covered with deep snow and ice, until at last we were looking down upon the Nut—a mere excrescence in a vast landscape of bare or snow-streaked hills.

We were now considerably over the 4000 feet line, and touched the 5000 feet level before beginning to descend. It is worth while, perhaps, to note, for the benefit of those consulting Norwegian maps on which the height is marked in feet, that as the Norwegian foot is slightly over 12 inches, an addition of some 30 feet has to be made to each 1000 to give the height in English measurement. A more serious error is involved in accepting the Norsk mile (11 kilometers), as the equivalent of our English mile. In walking through Slemdal, we had been informed, to our surprise and delight, that Skien, where we meant to sleep, was only "a good mile and a half" distant. We counted on reaching it soon after eight, and did not arrive until midnight had struck. But to return to the crest of the Meien Fjeld. It is occupied, where the path crosses it, by a large snow field—an incipient glacier, which sidles down through a gap in the plateau wall at a steepish incline. This was the only "queer" looking spot on the walk. The snow was ridged up into a sharpish edge like a roof, and on either side, next the rock, there was a miniature

bergschrund. But it was perfectly soft, safe, and easy travelling, and we almost regretted the change when we got down upon the shelving and slippery rocks on the right hand side. Progress then became a continual clambering down smooth flights of stairs, and the guide, whom we had pitied as he trudged barefoot through the snow, now became the object of our envy. My friend had a nasty fall, and injured his knee, and the pace became slower. We were not ill pleased when, at 4 p.m., we reached the *saeter* of Bleskestadr. A beautiful meadow, dotted over with birch and alder, where cows were grazing, and *saeter*-girls making hay; an ice-cold stream of water in which to plunge and swim; a new "Tourist Hut", erected only a week or two before by the Stavanger Club, with fresh smelling walls of pine deals, and clean beds; *flöte* and *flatbrod* galore. What more could the hearts of weary men wish? We fixed ourselves at Bleskestadr for the night, and spent a memorable and delightful time, drinking in the pure mountain air, and the wonderful beauty of the scene.

Next day we had a scramble of eight or nine miles down the Kvandal to Roalquam, one of the calling places of the Suldal Lake steamers. We took the sawmiller away from his work to row us in the teeth of the wind round to Naes (he refused to take more than the regulation fee), where we came upon the tourist track, and upon tourist fare and tourist manners. The glory of our excursion was over, in spite of the magnificent scenery through which our further route passed. We put up at Seiland's; followed the Bratlandsdal to Breifond, crossed the Horre-braekker (on which there was still, on the last day of July, a good deal of snow); slept to the thunderous roar of the Laatefos, and made a Sabbath day's journey to Odde, where we took the fjord steamer through Hardanger to Bergen. Here the kindness of old friends made our brief stay delightful, and we sailed in the good ship St. Rognvald for home. In Norway, as elsewhere, the winter of 1892 was long and lingering, and in normal years less snow may be found on the track across the Meien Fjeld. On the other hand we could not have had better luck in weather.