

THE
Cairngorm Club Journal.

Vol. III.

JANUARY, 1901.

No. 16.

A GLIMPSE OF THE DOLOMITES.

By JOHN GORDON, M.D.

BOTZEN, the capital of South Tyrol, offers an easy and delightful access to the Dolomites. Its charming situation between the mountain torrents Eisak and Talfer, its background of sunlit Dolomites, so fantastic in shape, and the long ramparts of the graceful Mendel mountains in the west, conspire to make it claim more than a passing visit from any wanderer.

The city looked beautiful as we, on the top of a diligence, clattered into its busy streets at the end of an August day. The workers, having finished their labours, were making homewards in the early twilight. Noisy were these groups with talk, and merry with laughter, labour-stained, and odorous of tobacco. The green growth of the vineyards pushed itself in rich foliage over the street walls, and hung out its heavy clusters of grapes, which gave promise of a full vintage.

Like many Continental cities, Botzen has awakened from the sleep of the Past, and has begun a life of modern vigour. New streets, boulevards, squares, and pleasure gardens have sprung into existence, while in the evenings the city is lit by electric light, and the squares are alive with moving throngs of citizens, who come to dine in the open air and listen to the music which the city band supplies. The Past is still quaintly represented by the narrow arcaded streets in the older parts of Botzen, and

there, indeed, most of the business is still transacted. The whole city has a Southern look. Its clear atmosphere, its wealth of vegetation, its flat red-roofed white or yellow-walled houses, and its swarthy inhabitants—one-twelfth of the population being Italian in descent—tell of warmer suns. Botzen has been for centuries the chief market in the line of commerce between Venice and the south of Germany. It has a population of some 12,000.

But we have come to see the neighbouring mountain masses, to which Botzen is the nearest gateway. We leave it, taking a course due east, and ascend along the Tiers valley, which leads into the Dolomites.

The driving-road zig-zags beside the roaring, much-tormented Tiers stream, which has raced in extreme hurry from the mountains higher up the valley. At this lowest part of the valley the river has cut a deep narrow gorge in the reddish porphyry, from which, when swollen by heavy rains or melting snows, it makes wild efforts to escape, but finds them almost futile. The road is a wonder of engineering skill. A successful fight has been waged in controlling, guiding, and overcoming the destructive agencies of the river, and the dangers threatened by overhanging porphyry. When one watches how cunningly the road has been carried past this dangerous ledge, over that out-jutting impossible-looking angle, round that huge mass of rock, and how ever and always skilful advantage has been taken of the slightest possibility of a path, one gives unstinted admiration to those workers who spent brain and muscle in the service of man.

Our Austrian driver, who in his bearing still retains marked evidence of his military training, urges along his four willing steeds, and they plainly know the way. His long whip cracks in kindly noise far off from the horses' heads, and its message reverberates amongst the gorges. At present the porphyry rocks are being tunnelled, on both sides of the valley, by large gangs of workmen. Botzen has resolved to have pure water supplied in abundance to its inhabitants, and it has also determined to secure greater water power to give itself still more electric light.

Ere long we begin to pass beyond this interesting gorge, and to reach a higher level, where the soil is composed of sandstone and shale. Here the land is clad with vegetation. Stately chestnut and walnut trees, tall pines, and vines are seen. The valley is dotted with clean, thriving villages, in which are quaint houses with frescoed walls and balconies overhung by trailing plants, while the church spires betray by their rounded forms the influence of the East and of the South. The healthy-looking inhabitants are busy wood-sawing or hay-making, and the noise of the cow-bells mingles with the rush of the river. We tarry at many an inn, for our carriage conveys the Governmental mails. It is the prevailing custom in Tyrol, except in large towns, to have the Post located in the chief inns. The natives are seen enjoying the thin red wine of the district. They look a happy, contented, sober people, but hard work has left its furrows on many a face. The road still winds higher, and the outlook widens. Looking backward across the Eisack Valley and the basin of Botzen, we see the glaciers of the Ortler Alps extending from the Engadine to the Brenner. We are now beyond Welschnofen, and amongst the Dolomites. To the south towers in wild beauty the Latemar group, in the late afternoon bedecked in sunset robes—and to the north the Rosengarten group rears its walls more than 5000 feet above the valley.

The first glance at a Dolomite mountain in this region impresses a feeling of transparency and colour different from anything we know in the rocks at home. And even if a chemist will tell us that there are Dolomites in the North of England whose composition is like that of the dolomite rocks elsewhere—a combination of carbonate of magnesia and carbonate of lime—one's conviction is that there is something more than a special chemical combination required to explain the peculiar enchantment of the rocks themselves in South Tyrol.

To be sure, the sky above them has, in usual summers, a deeper, more glorious blue than we see in our island, and the growth of lichens and algæ which cling to these

precipices, like long streaks of some mere colour in the rock, is something we are unfamiliar with to this extent. The deep cañons which are run through a mountain mass, from luxuriant pasturages at the base to a gleaming glacier at the summit, present vistas of mountain-climbing which at once whet the desire. Then the huge plateau on the summit, which, viewed from below, has the appearance of one continuous tableland, is in reality rent by innumerable minor cañons—the so-called “chimneys”—which are the special danger and delight of Dolomite mountain-climbing. The Rosengarten group shows particularly well one of the striking features of the Dolomites, in the presence of brilliant red and green bands of soft deposits between successive terraces of the lustrous Dolomites. Sometimes the softer rocks weather with a more gentle slope, and patches of Alpine flowers and shrubs find roothold. Yet the finest flowers are actually found in the crevices of the Dolomite rock.

The road now leads in lovely windings amongst tall pine trees. Suddenly we catch a sight of the Karer See. Embosomed it lies in still beauty, unvexed by cloud or wind, mirroring the graceful trees. The colour in its depths is of the most exquisite blue—like that which gleams in a peacock's feathers. Its shallows are flecked by patches of soft yellows and olive greens. This delight of colour was a feast to the eyes then, and its memory is now a haunting joy. Still a few turns of the road, and the huge Karar-See Hotel comes into view. This is a haunt of fashionable Austrians, who come in pursuit of health in the mountain walks.

Upwards still the journey leads till the highest part of the Karer Pass (5300 feet above sea-level) is gained. Then the famous Fassa valley, which is to be our holiday home, is seen, hemmed in by its Dolomites. We descend as the evening deepens, and it is late ere we reach the tiny village of Campitello, which is at the far-off end of the valley. Its old-fashioned inn was an oasis of comfort, where all was clean, where the food was varied, wholesome, and well cooked, and where the kindly Italian

“Cameriere” (waiter) was constant in the care of the guests.

The bad weather which we had experienced in Scotland was again to be endured in a modified form in South Tyrol. Very lovely were the mornings; from 4 o'clock they were full of serene sunshine. The sky was clear, and continued so till about 12 o'clock. Then clouds sailed slowly up from the south. A gloom fell on the mountain peaks, and draperies of mist appeared. Light passing showers fell—precursors of the later torrents of rain.

Such a day we spent on the Rodella mountains, making our way to Canazei. And so it happened that long ere we reached Canazei we were caught in the wet folds of the rain-cloud and thoroughly drenched. Such a condition is a mere trifle when there follow a clean albergo, dry clothes, wholesome food, a long, deep mountain-air sleep, and fresh, untired limbs for a morning climb. But unfortunately the early morning which greeted us was full of cloud and mist. After breakfast it began to clear, and soon outleapt the sun in all the glory of the South. Too late for a hard climb, we gave ourselves the pleasure of a walk to the newly-opened Contrin Haus. This is one of the latest of the German and Austrian Alpine Club Huts. For a few days, from the slopes and top of Rodella, we had looked into the Contrinthal, and had frequently said—“Surely it is a valley of constant rain and mist”; for over and over again the storm-wrack mustered around the summit of Marmolata, and rolled in wild energy along the valley, to melt before it crossed the Avisio stream.

To-day it was clear in the deep Contrinthal, and we resolved to explore its wild beauty. The first part of the walk from Canazei is along a well-made mountain road, through green cattle-grazed meadows, fringed by dark pine woods. The Avisio torrent roars downward beside the road, chafing its light green water on boulder and stone. Its moist music fills all the valley, which is thickly dotted with well-built and comfortable-looking châlets. At every four hundred yards or so there floats the white and red pennon of some simple albergo. Truly a land of liberal

refreshment is this! For the first half-hour's walk the road is almost level. It then begins to ascend gently.

We cross many lusty torrents racing from the mountain sides to join the main stream, which greedily takes every contribution as it goes. The frequently-seen red paint of the Alpine Club guides us on and up. Across the Avisio lies a tiny hamlet on the slope of the green Penia Alpe; it is a summer home for the herdsmen.

A notice with the words "Zur Wasserfälls" guides up a side-path—and at the same moment there greets the ears the roar of falling water. We find it as the full glory of the mid-day sunshine is poured on the snow-white tortured waters. The water in large volume hisses, seethes, and hastens downwards, and, gathering itself into a strong stream, forces its way through a huge mass of fallen limestone, whence it issues to break roaring into another waterfall—and again prepare for a still farther plunge as a third waterfall.

The main path steadily zig-zags upwards, and we go on. We catch in our walk amongst the stately pines exquisite glimpses of the blue sky overhead—pools of blue across which wandering white clouds sail slowly. The sound of bird voices is missed. Wild animal life is conspicuous by its absence in this country. But the constant hum and chirp of insect life fills the air.

At last the forest region ends, and the road leads on through a green plateau about half-a-mile broad. Distances, however, are not easily judged by one accustomed to the dull grey North. On a lower level the river flows, and shows signs of wild floods in the wide stone wastes and torn meadow banks. On either side of this flat meadow rises a sheer straight Dolomite wall, almost perpendicularly. These guardian masses rear their peaks and sides of yellow and grey two thousand feet above the stream, till their pine-feathered upmost ridge seems to greet the sky. All around in this part of the walk mighty boulders are strewn. Many of them are half hidden by the green tassels of the larch, or softened by tiny carpets of delicately-green moss, and decked by many-coloured lichens.

It was interesting to observe the flowers at this height of about 5200 feet. We see on the flat plain, surmounted by these Dolomite rocks, the Grass of Parnassus, Vetches, Hawkweed, Bluebells, Clovers, Eyebright, Mountain Daisies, Marguerites, Bladder Campion, Purple and White Thistles, Blue Aconite, Thyme, and Forget-me-nots. We leave the track and strike at random through the meadow, pleased to hear the flicking of the long nodding grass against our hill boots.

Onward the road leads beyond the grim quietness of the sheer mountain walls. Now the valley widens and rolls its green carpet, gemmed with flowers, to the very edge of the barren rocks. The spurs of the mountains are here lower, and are the homes of pine, larch, and dwarf firs, while the peaceful spears of the grass wave far up their cruel-looking sides. One cannot fail to observe the apparent fertility of the limestone soil, and how every inch of it carries its offering of vegetation.

Ere long the road crosses by a bridge to the left of the main stream—and almost immediately we are clasped in the mighty semi-circle of the mountains. Streams glitter in silver sheen, and leap in numbers adown the rock ledges, hurrying across our path. We fancy as we walk that the streams now move with more energy to escape from this arid region through the mountain doorway into the smiling plain below. Far off, for the first time, the yellow-looking Hut belonging to the Alpine Club becomes plainly visible.

The Hut is built of stone on a small green plateau, which, on every side except the north-west, is closely sheltered by the rocks of the neighbouring Marmolata. From the Hut there are various walks across the Jochs, and from it climbing of the surrounding peaks can be arranged, or the snow and glacier-clad Marmolata can be conquered as often as you wish. It is a plain, substantial structure. The managers of the Club have placed in charge of it an active and tidy married couple. On the ground floor is a fairly large dining-room, which is connected with the kitchen. If one prefers, one may dine on

the veranda, which offers a delightful view to the south. The bedrooms are six in number, and they are on the first floor. They are fairly large, and each contains one or two most comfortable beds, and the furnishings are simple but sufficient. The guides' chamber is capable of giving sleeping accommodation to six, or in crowded seasons more. It occupies the upper part of the Hut.

The charge for a bedroom to a member of the Club is a gulden (about 1s. 8d.) per night; to non-members half-a-gulden extra. Food, wine, or coffee is supplied at the same reasonable prices. A fairly good mountaineering library is present, and letters can be delivered daily to the dwellers. A supply of all that is necessary in case of accident is kept in the building, and also a fair assortment of useful medicines, so that in illness help is at hand. To judge by the number of names in the visitors' book, a very considerable stream of tourists flows to this remote dwelling-place.

The signs of mighty changes are all around. One sees where the glacier has recently been, and can observe the nature of its work, and the result of its retreat—torn rocks, masses of boulders, screes of stones, and the polished surfaces of the rocks. One can also recognise the cutting edge of the streams on the rock, the deepening of the gullies, and the hammering of stone into pebbles and sandy débris.

Here, too, the signs of the upheaval of the mountains are almost self-evident. Red shales and marls, the same that one observes below the limestone and Dolomite masses at the Rosengarten and elsewhere, have been here broken and pushed far above their normal bedding-planes, and the displaced and fractured limestone and Dolomite rock has been carried with them, and left in gigantic wedges across the valley.

We are now beyond the Hut at the snow-line. A thick snow-field lies on the north-west side of the great Marmolata, and will continue there till its winter companions arrive.

The green grass struggles in thin lines almost to the very edge of the glacier, and so do a few scattered firs.

A tiny clump of huts and *châlets* can be seen on the west, at about the same level as the Hut. There, even at that high altitude, we see signs of industry.

The glacier hangs wrinkled over the edge of Marmolata, and glitters blue-green in the sunshine.

Gazing southward from the Hut, nothing but the magnificent mountain billows of the Primiero Dolomites are to be seen at the far sky-line, tossing themselves into higher and higher crests. All are torn into masses, fissured perpendicularly and laterally, jagged, gnarled, and twisted. The highest peaks tower 4000 or 5000 feet above where we rest on the grass. When the sunshine fills every nook and cranny, they glow in vivid burning glories, all their colours aflame in the light, a wall of quivering beauty. Peak, boss, finger, citadel, pinnacle, and figure—every possible variety of shape—are there: grandly fantastic, gloriously beautiful. The chisels of the ever-working elemental sculptors of Nature—Air, Ice, and Water—have worked on these mountain masses of grey limestone and Dolomite, and have shaped in their atelier a combination of glorious forms which nowhere else can be found or matched.

While we still linger, the highest peak has caught the light of the western sun, and glows like a jewel. How it contrasts in its radiant beauty with the others that are in cloud or in the shadow!

Such a sight impresses warm memories of mountain light and glory that must ever hang clear and joy-giving in the picture-gallery of the mind as we pace our own northern land of mist and grey sky.

Grudgingly we turn from the evening sunshine and the sunlit mountain, and pass downward to the plain. But again we feast on mountain glories, for the jagged peaks of the Lang Kofel are in front, and we watch the evening light giving them their Alpine glow. A land of beauty this, turn where we may: a land of delicious memories and present joys: a land which to discover once is to seek it again and yet again: a land to conjure with when life is grey, or when joy seems to have left the world.