

MY SCHWARZWALDREISE.

BY A. LANDSBOROUGH THOMSON, M.A.

AT German Universities the admirable custom obtains of breaking a rather long summer session by a whole week's holiday at Whitsuntide. And so it happened that the early morning of June 6th, four years ago, saw two mountain-loving students, Edouard Heimann and myself, taking train at Heidelberg *en route* for Freiburg. To both of us, North German and Scot, the Black Forest or Schwarzwald was new ground, and we were eagerly looking forward to a few day's tramping among its hills.

Freiburg was reached early in the forenoon, but we left an inspection of the town for our return journey, and, snatching a hasty lunch at the station, took the next train to the south-east by that well-known railway, the Höllenthalbahn. The Höllenthal is indeed a beautiful valley, and through its woods and fields the train wound steeply till it reached a lake, the Titisee, and the village which is called after it. Here we left the railway and took a motor-bus southward. At first we went along the lake-side, and then for some miles through fine woods till another lake, the Schluchsee (2950 feet) was reached. Here we thought ourselves near enough to our journey's end to walk the remainder in what was left of the afternoon; so, slinging on the rucksacks, we set off on our tramp, at first along a short-cut round the end of the lake, but afterwards along a highroad which was hot and dusty where the trees threw no shade.

We took things easily that afternoon, and found the ten miles quite enough for such a short first day. Towards the end of the walk the road crossed the watershed into the valley of the southward flowing Alb, at the head of which lies the health resort of St. Blasien. Our next day's route lay down the Albthal, but instead of descending to St. Blasien we preferred to leave the main road and spend the night at the inn of Höchenschwand,

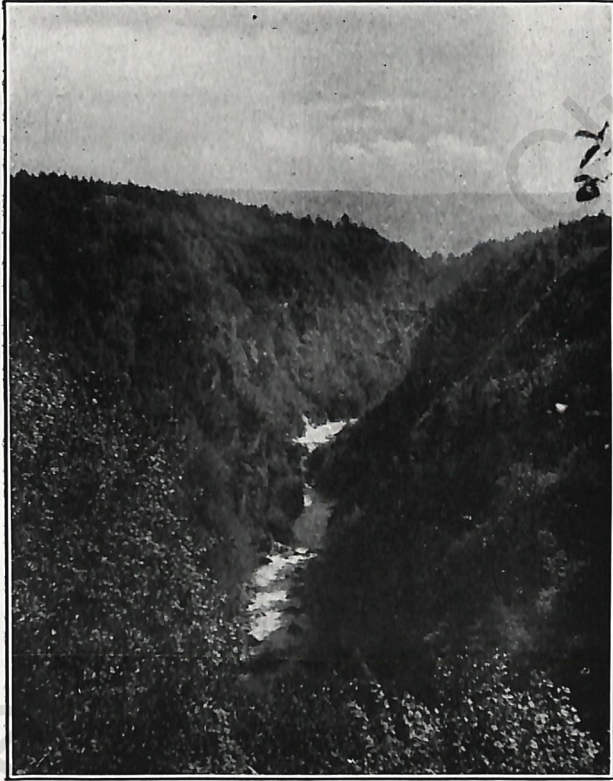


Photo by

L. N. G. Ramsay.

A VIEW OF THE ALB VALLEY (BLACK FOREST).

a little village perched on a bare ridge on the eastern side of the valley.

Even in a hot South German summer an altitude of 3350 feet was sufficient to ensure a cold nip in the night air, and this we felt with enjoyment, suggesting as it did the distant Alpine snows which the haze stubbornly hid from us as twilight deepened into night. And gradually a thick mist rose in the surrounding valleys, appearing, as we looked down on its even surface, like a dead white moonlit sea lying calm and silent between the black walls of some long fjord. Then night closed down till the mist became a grey ghostly glimmer, and finally lost the last rays of light and was merged in the surrounding darkness.

Next day an unfortunate blunder turned our quiet walk down the Albthal into a rather uncomfortable race. The plan which we had drawn up for the day included a seventeen-mile walk down the Albthal to Albrück, where the tributary joins the Rhine, and a ten-mile walk from Wehr to Todtmoos up the parallel but more westerly valley of the Wehra: the comparatively uninteresting level portion between Albrück and Wehr was to be covered by train. It was while we were breakfasting that my companion discovered a miscalculation and announced that the only convenient train left Albrück, seventeen miles away, in rather less than four hours! Within a very few minutes, you may be sure, breakfast was over, the bill settled, the rucksacks on, and the way begun. At first we followed a rough path over open ground on the southward ridge of the hill, but soon we turned steeply to the right among the trees and joined the valley road some distance below St. Blasien.

The road was good and shady, and sloped gently southwards; we had it very much to ourselves, passing few houses and seeing few people. Almost the whole way the sides of the valley were splendidly wooded, and the route presented many picturesque turns and beautiful stretches. At first the road lay along the bottom of the valley, the Alb flowing noisily beside. But later the

road kept high up on the left slope and the stream became almost inaudible in a deep gorge. The valley proved exceptional in that, as we proceeded down it, the scenery became finer. The road became a terrace, the ground rising steeply on the left and falling abruptly to the right. The sides of the gorge were precipitous at places, and fine crags peeped out among the great trees. Several times rocky buttresses barred the way of the road and, being too steep on the face to be rounded, were pierced by tunnels.

At the end we caught our train with two minutes to spare, reached Wehr, lunched and rested. Late in the afternoon we started up the Wehrathal, taking things easily to make up for the forenoon's haste. The Wehr, too, in its lower course had a gorge with precipitous rocky sides, but the road followed the stream along the bottom, crossing it from time to time. At one place a pair of dippers was seen; they belong to a variety slightly different from that familiar to us on our Highland burns. The valley became more open higher up, and reaching the pleasant summer-resort of Todtmoos (2625 feet) we put up at one of its hotels, as yet almost empty.

The next day was to be a day of hills, just as its predecessor had been a day of valleys. It was also to be a day of tinkling cow-bells, for during that whole day we followed rough paths, through woods and across steep pastures, always with that pleasant Alpine sound in our ears, now loud and near, now faint and distant. There are indeed many points of resemblance between the higher levels of the Black Forest and the lower levels of the Alps, but few so striking as that wind-borne tinkle. So gentle a sound would seem incongruous heard among heather and crag, and would form a jarring note in the concert of the lusty Highland winds. But borne by soft breezes across the steep sun-warmed pastures of the Schwarzwald, Jura, or lower Alpine hills, it forms a part of the natural harmony; in some indescribable way it adds greatly to the beauty of those scenes, and is missed whenever we cross such ground without its soft accompaniment.



Photo by

L. N. G. Ramsay.

A VIEW IN THE BLACK FOREST.

From a hill on the western side of the Wehra Valley.

(The long ridge in the background, to the centre, is the Feldberg, 4,907 ft.)

To reach the higher levels, we struck up the western slope of the valley by a rough road directly behind Todtmoos. The ascent was rapidly made, through fields, past the large wooden Schwarzwald cottages with their steep roofs, past clumsy four-wheeled farm carts pulled by oxen. Various birds, too, were noted: an occasional carrion-crow, a more frequent redstart, or a white-wagtail, that lighter-hued continental cousin of our own familiar pied or water-wagtail.

The road soon crossed the ridge by a pass, and at the summit we struck off to the north on a rough track along the ridge itself, rising steeply towards our first top. Here we came in contact with the system of marked paths, the "blazed trails" of the German touring clubs. All the different routes are marked at intervals with some distinctive mark—say, a blue triangle, a yellow square, or a red circle. In the woods the marks are metal and are fixed to the trees a few feet from the ground; on the open pastures they are painted on large stones, and are sometimes difficult to find. When the path is distinct and unbranched the marks are at long intervals, but they are to be found in abundance wherever the path becomes indistinct, changes direction, or crosses another. So well do the Germans overdo this marking, that even the most obstinately stupid person could scarcely lose himself if he tried, except perhaps in the open pasture; for sometimes the route lies across the grass without any definite path, and the marks may be too obscure—for example, a blue square on a stone amongst a clump of blue flowers—leading to some slight trouble in finding the beginning of the path when the woods are reached again.

In parts of the Swiss Juras and in the Eastern Alps marked routes are also to be found. They are usually local excursions in the neighbourhood of some village in which an explanation is generally posted up. The Black Forest routes, however, have more method in them, and extend for great distances in many cases. Thus the red-diamond of the Basel-Pforzheim "highway" traverses the range from end to end, along its main ridges and over its

chief summits. It is frequently crossed by other routes, and numerous short local paths complete the network. An almost unlimited number of combinations of different routes can be made, and instructions for quite a complicated journey can be summed up in "Follow the yellow circle till it crosses the red triangle; follow the red triangle to the right till it crosses the blue square; follow the blue square to the left till you reach your destination: note that on the red triangle route there is a stretch of nearly four kilometers without a beer-garden." German civilisation is surely a "fearful and wonderful" thing! We have indeed heard a wish expressed at a late hour in the smoking-room at Sligachan that the main ridge of the Cuillin should be outlined in red and its branches in blue, but we hope that the day is distant when it will be part of Cairngorm routine to follow heliotrope hexagons across the Larig Ghru or to scrutinise the stones of Corrie Etchachan for purple paraboloids!

It was the red-diamond of the Basel-Pforzheim route that we had joined where the road crossed the ridge along which it ran, and it soon led us to our first summit, the Hochkopf (4154 feet). The hill, like most German hills, was wooded to the top, but a wooden ladder and platform afforded a fine view. Some swifts were wheeling in the air above us and must have been at least a thousand feet above the houses on which they nested; but the horizontal distance was small, for the slopes were steep.

From the Hochkopf the route led us along the ridge, and, after a slight dip, to the top of the Blössling (4301 feet). The actual summit was clear of trees and a bench replaced the more usual platform or tower. Here we lunched and rested a little before descending, for between us and our third hill there was a big dip down to where a road crossed a low pass, to which we now descended by a very steep path winding down the wooded face. The ascent on the other side partly through woods and partly over pasture was long, and it was late in the afternoon before we reached the summit of the Herzogenhorn (4789 feet), the second highest hill in the Black Forest. The summit

is unwooded, and the ground falls precipitously away on one side. On the top was a lingering snowdrift and a wooden refreshment-hut: the weather being fine and our rucksacks well-provisioned, we voted the latter a blot on the landscape. There must, however, be many who welcome its presence on this rather lonely route.

The Feldberg (4903 feet), the summit of the Schwarzwald, was now in plain view a few miles away, and to it—the dip between not being so great as the last—we proposed to go. The Feldberg is a long ridge rather than a peak. It has few trees on it, and cattle graze all over its grassy slopes. An easy driving road leads from the valley to the Hotel Feldberghof at one end of the ridge, and from there a path continues to the highest point, where there is an inn and a small stone tower. It struck me as strange that so ignoble a hill should be higher than Ben Nevis and all the Cairngorms. But truly the glory of a mountain does not lie in mathematical symbols!

The day was growing old and we pressed on, our route taking us direct to the summit, crossing the road instead of following it round by the Feldberghof. We crossed the grassy slopes on which the cattle were grazing, and which afford good skiing in winter, reaching the summit inn after a twenty-two-mile day of many ups and downs. The light was failing and we first of all climbed the little tower.

As is the case with most important view points in Germany, there is a fixed brass plate which shows the directions of the main summits and points of interest in the panorama. Hopefully we looked in the directions which bore the names of famous Alpine peaks, but the far horizon was dim, and it was not until two months later, from a summit of the Juras, that I got my first view of the great snow-clad ranges. Perforce we had to console ourselves with the nearer hills. To the north rose the summits of the northern part of the Black Forest; to the west, beyond the broad flat Rhine-plain, lay the twin range, the Vosges Mountains, with its highest point, the Belchen, and the marches of France; to the south-west was the Schwarzwald

Belchen, third summit of the range; to the south stretched the way by which we had come.

Next day we went down the slopes towards the Belchen, missing, as we did not then realise, the beautiful Feldsee, a little lake in a wooded hollow. Before us, still many hours' distant, rose our peak, and we thought it the most imposing of the hills of this region although inferior in altitude to both the Feldberg and the Herzogenhorn. For the first time we met other pedestrians in considerable numbers, for this part of the route is more frequented than that over which we had come on the previous day. After descending for about 700 feet we entered the forest; on the bare or sparsely-wooded slopes above, larks and tree-pipits had been the only noticeable birds, but now several species were to be heard, including the sweet-voiced song-thrush. It was interesting to meet with this familiar species at these levels, for it is a northern bird and almost unknown in summer in the plains of South Germany. I had noted a few above the 1000 feet contour in the Odenwald, and here they seemed fairly common at a little over 4000 feet.

In the depths of the forest we at last quitted the red diamond route, and began to follow a blue sign more directly towards the Belchen. Soon we crossed a small woodland stream, followed it upwards for some distance, and then emerged on an open hillside. For a while the route lay over open but fairly level ground, descending gradually to a road. Crossing this, we wound upward into woods again, and followed an undulating path through them till the mid-day halt was called in a pretty glade.

Afterwards the path led steeply upward, though still among trees, for some time. At length we reached the steep-sided dome which forms the summit of the Belchen, and the path became a zig-zag series of artificial terraces. When we reached the top (4642 feet), where a skylark was singing, our first glance was southward, but disappointment again awaited us, for the horizon was hazier than ever, and we had to acknowledge that our last chance of an Alpine view was gone.

The summit is a bare grassy ridge undisfigured by any refreshment hut, but a small hotel nestles unobtrusively a few hundred feet lower down on the southern slope. This slope is gentler than the others, and a road comes up as far as the hotel, but it was by a steep path through the woods on the north-western side that we descended, after a short interlude, to the base of the mountain. A few miles of trudging along a level highroad was pleasantly varied by short-cuts over riverside meadows, until we ended our pilgrimage at the branch-line terminus of Staufen, after a day's total of some twenty-eight miles.

The jolting train which bore us through the gathering dusk to Freiburg gave us ample time to discuss and formulate a verdict on the past few days. The well-marked paths of the Schwarzwald and its frequent hotels might soon pall on the devotee of trackless heather and impromptu bivouacs, but they certainly enable even a stranger to cover in a short time with ease and certainty a large stretch of most beautiful country. For a beautiful country the Black Forest undoubtedly is, and it has a character all its own, with its dark lakes and deep-cut gorges, its fine sweeps of woodland and steep stretches of sub-Alpine meadow.

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Next day my companion crossed the Rhine-plain to the Vosges range, that country of ruined castles perched on wooded peaks. But I, having already plans for a visit there later on, went northward. For three hours the express carried me along that level plain with its interminable fields and orchards, hop-gardens, and plantations, muddy roads and slow ox-carts, clustering villages and scorching heat. Then the wooded hills appeared ahead with the Neckar emerging from among them, old Heidelberg creeping irregularly up their flanks and modern Heidelberg straggling outward on the plain, and the ancient Schloss, now a ruined symbol, watching over all.

NOTE.—As the writer had no camera with him on his tour, he is indebted for the accompanying photographs to his friend Mr. Lewis N. G. Ramsay, M.A., who visited the district the following summer.