

## III.—ACROSS THE NORTH ALBANIAN ALPS.

BY WILLIAM SMITH.

*[Mr. Smith was in Serbia for twelve months, lived through the plague of typhus, watched the development of the crisis with Bulgaria, and marched with the women doctors and nurses of the Scottish Women's Hospital across the mountains when the enemy over-ran the country. The following is an account of part of the terrible march].*

AFTER several weeks, we at last (December, 1915) reached Ipek. Here we were to leave our wagons and the splendid oxen that had worked for us so well, buy pack-ponies, and cross the mountains to Scutari, through what is, perhaps, one of the least-known regions in Europe. Every hour was now of value, for the first big storm of the winter was over-due, and we were hoping to get through the great pass before the snow came.

Ipek is largely inhabited by Albanians, and, until the Balkan War, had been really an Albanian town, though nominally part of the Turkish Empire. In normal times Ipek (Slavonic, "Pech,") might have a population of something like 15,000, but now the little town was overflowing with refugees. The retreating Serbian army was pouring in, and the population quickly doubled; then it trebled. Food was getting scarcer every day, and the sooner we got away the better. We were lucky in getting quarters in one of the military barracks, where we had at least a roof over our heads and beds to sleep in, if we cared. But, to quote the genial Pepys, "the beds were good, but lousy"; and I found greater comfort in an empty wagon in the barrack-yard.

Buying ponies and provisions took the better part of three days. Enough food had to be carried for the



*Sketch by*

NEGOTIATING AN AWKWARD CORNER.

*William Smith.*

journey, for we were going into a country where food, never plentiful, could not now be got for love or money. One comfort we had. The enemy was no longer at our heels, though we afterwards discovered that he was nearer than we imagined.

On the day of setting out, we were in the barrack-yard an hour before dawn, to find that the dreaded snow-storm had come during the night, and the ground was already several inches deep in snow. We were three days too late. The ponies were loaded up. A great art, loading a pack-pony. There is one, and only one, way of doing it; any other is sure to lead to disaster. Fortunately, our Serbian orderlies knew the trick, and we had few troubles with the baggage during the march.

We entered the pass an hour after we left Ipek. A long day's march was before us, for the only possible camping-ground was at a place far ahead, where the pass opened out. The farther in we got the narrower the pass became, until we seemed completely shut in by the great cliffs which towered above us, their summits lost in the clouds. The conditions were far from favourable for bringing away vivid impressions of a new country. The immediate job on hand—which happened to be leading a pony along a dangerous, icy path, where a slip might be fatal to both man and beast—occupied all my attention. Little remains but a confused picture of half-starved refugees and soldiers and a veritable chaos of snow-clad mountains and dark gorges, and the vague memory of the wild music of a rushing river racing to the sea.

The snow continued for hours, and with all the traffic (there were hundreds of refugees and horses ahead of us) the going became dangerous. Horses, unaccustomed to work of this kind, were constantly in difficulties, and the four days in the pass cost many a poor beast its life. But, fortunately, the ponies we got at Ipek were used to these mountain tracks in all sorts of weather. These ponies may not be much to

look at, but they are hardy and active and sure-footed, and it is best to let them take their own way at difficult places. Early on the march I had a difference of opinion with my pony about the best way of taking a steep descent, and insistence on my own way very nearly led to disaster. After that I gave him full liberty at awkward places. Before taking a steep descent, he would stop and look about him with a glassy eye, his expression suggesting that he was sick of the whole hopeless business. Then he would cautiously advance one foot and commence to slide and slither down the icy track, sometimes sitting on his tail, but nearly always arriving at the bottom without mishap. This pony had a disagreeable habit of walking on the dangerous outside edge of the path, seemingly for the sheer pleasure of making my flesh creep. In the end I got to know, but I cannot say to love, him. His nature was dour and unsympathetic, and affection would have been thrown away on him. In form he was anything but graceful, and his colour difficult to define—a sort of brownish-grey, neither the one nor the other; sometimes the brown seemed to get the upper hand, sometimes the grey, and it was difficult to pick him out from amongst a lot of other horses on a dark morning.

Delays, due to horses falling, were frequent, and night came down long before we were near our camping-ground. A difficult enough task in daylight, leading a horse through the darkness of the night over a narrow and icy track, with a cliff on one side and on the other a dark abyss (perhaps a couple of hundred feet deep, with a rushing river at the bottom) is not fun by any means. After more than two hours of this trying work, we came in sight of the camp fires. Trees had been felled for fuel, and great bonfires were blazing everywhere, lighting up the snowy landscape and the haggard faces of the weary travellers, many of whom were already asleep.

It was snowing hard and perishingly cold when we

again took the road at dawn. The outlook was rather serious. These mountain tracks often get completely blocked in a few hours, and a big storm then would, in all probability, have cost the lives of hundreds. Fortunately, the snow stopped an hour after we started, and a welcome sun shone for part of the day.



*Sketch by* W. Smith. A TYPICAL ALBANIAN.

During this part of the retreat we were often helped by Albanian peasants, who posted themselves at places where they knew that help would be needed with the horses. In appearance the Albanian is a keen, intelligent-looking fellow, with a more cheerful countenance than the Slav. Tall, lean, and as nimble

as a goat, he takes rather a pride in his personal adornment and generally goes armed to the teeth. With a rifle slung across his shoulder and a villainous-like yataghan and pistol stuck in his girdle, he looks what he is—a wild, lawless character. He loves his weapons, and his pistol or revolver, with a barrel about a foot long, is usually highly ornamented. Several times I was asked to show my little "Colt," but the Albanian, while admitting that it had some qualities, seemed to prefer his own more showy weapon. The Albanian claims (and with some reason) to be descended from the original settlers in the Balkan Peninsula. After the Balkan War, Albania was given her independence by the Great Powers in conference, but this doubtful boon was not granted for love of Albania. It emanated solely from the mutual distrust and jealousy of the Powers concerned, each thinking the other had its eye on the country—which was very likely the case. Unfortunately, the Albanian has never shown much capacity for self-government. The tribal system is still strong, very much as it was in the Highlands of Scotland before the "Forty-five"; and the different clans are still ruled by their Beys or Chiefs.

Fierce and lawless though they are, these mountaineers possess some not unworthy qualities. I was told by an English officer, whom I met there, and who knows the country and its people well, that once an Albanian makes a bargain to act as guide, he can be trusted, even to the death, for, rather than break his plighted word, he will give his life in your defence. This, however, might not prevent him robbing you a week after, provided that no bargain to the contrary had been made. The vendetta is still strong in Albania, and tribal and personal quarrels are frequent. Here, again, their strict code of honour comes in. A man who, in ordinary circumstances, would be shot at sight by the enemy with whom he had a blood-feud, can arrange a truce for a given time, and may then move freely about, conscious that his life is absolutely safe. Even a

member of a clan at war with another can, in these circumstances, visit the village of his deadly enemies without fear. Should he out-stay his time, however, even by one short hour, he will most assuredly be shot. In such a mountainous country, ideal for the sniper, defence is a comparatively easy matter, and the Albanian like his Montenegrin neighbour, has never been quite conquered by the Turk. But national unity seems impossible, and everything points to the Albanian being absorbed by the Slav in the course of time.

The country we were passing through is well-wooded, even on the higher hills. Beech and stunted oaks seem to be the prevailing trees, with pines on the higher altitudes. Bears are still to be found in these mountains, and wolves are said to be common. It may be that the long procession of travellers scared these animals off, or perhaps the appearance of the half-starved refugees was not tempting enough, but we saw no sign of either of them during our trek.

With the deep snow the going was slow, and darkness came long before we got to the little hamlet where we hoped to pass the night. Shelter was found in a mountain hut, but it was so crowded with travellers that sleep was next to impossible. We were grateful, however, for a roof of any kind over our heads. It was savagely cold, for we were by this time high up amongst the mountains.

The third day was very much like the others, but at night we had the great good fortune to find quarters in a stable with plenty of clean straw to sleep on. Andrievitza was reached the following night, and we decided to rest there for a day and try to buy some stores, for by this time our provisions were almost finished. After much seeking, we got some black bread from the authorities, but we got little else, for there was hardly any food left in the town. The long march and insufficient food were beginning to tell on the poor horses, and some of them were obviously getting worn out.

Though we were now out of the pass, our biggest

climb was yet ahead of us. This day's march was the least interesting, but perhaps the most trying of the whole journey. A thaw had set in during the night, and, to make matters worse, the fog came down, and little of the country could be seen. Everyone was tired out long before we reached the top, and one of the horses, completely done up, had to be left by the way-side, while several others were showing signs of distress. Night fell as we reached the summit, over 7000 feet above the sea. The hardest part of the journey was over, and we were leaving the hills at last. By noon the next day we were in an altogether different climate, and had left the snow behind. At Podgoritza, we had to wait three days for the steamer which was to take us to Scutari, across the lake of the same name.

I had heard so much about the beauties of Lake Scutari that I was quite prepared for the disappointment which duly came along. There is little or no vegetation on the great hills which surround the lake, and the day we crossed they were looking inky and colourless. Scutari itself is more interesting with its bazaars and polyglot population. It was captured by the Montenegrins from the Turk early in the Balkan War. At the settlement which followed, Montenegro (owing to the insistence of Austria) had to withdraw, and since then the town had been garrisoned by an international force, with an English Governor at the head of affairs. When the present war broke out, the Montenegrins once more captured the town, to the disgust of the inhabitants, who had enjoyed two years of good government and were beginning to prosper.

From Scutari we continued our march to San Giovanni di Medua, on the Adriatic, where, after three days of waiting, we got a ship which took us to Brindisi, and London was reached in time for Christmas. It was good to be back once more in a land of plenty, and very difficult to realise that we had been nearly starving and sleeping out under the stars but one short week before.