

A PATH INTO ITALY.

BY R. M. WILLIAMSON, M.A., LL.B.

IF the breakfast he has snatched at Lausanne has so far revived the weary traveller as to enable him to take an interest in his surroundings, he may note, as the train swings round at Martigny to follow the course of the Rhone, an opening in the mountain mass which guards the railway on the south. If the traveller is really a tramp and has no baggage registered to any² where in particular, he will do well to leave the train and explore the opening. He will find a baby railway ready to transport him as far as Orsieres, from which in due time he may reach the Grand St. Bernard. At Sembrancher, however, about ten miles from Martigny, is the meeting-place of two valleys. One runs due south towards Orsieres; the other—in which we are for the moment interested—runs at first eastward and after a few miles south-eastward, and is the Val de Bagnes, down which the glacier stream Drance rushes.

No town-dweller need look for a sweeter valley than this. At first it is open and smiling, with orchards and fruit in abundance. Moreover, it beckons the traveller to its further recesses where gleam summits of eternal snow, for on the east side the valley in its upper reaches is guarded by Mount Pleueur, Mount Blanc de Seilon, and the Pigne d'Arolla; on the west by the Combin Corbassière and the Grand Combin. As far as Lourtier, some seven miles beyond Sembrancher, there is a good driving road, and the traveller may indulge in the luxury of a mountain carriage. After that the road is little better than a path, and if the traveller still wishes to drive he may do so as far as Fionnay, other five miles, but he must be content with a long narrow vehicle like a water-trough on wheels, used for bringing home the hay and innocent of springs.



Photo by

Mrs. R. M. Williamson.

SUMMIT OF COL DE FENETRE DE BALME,
LOOKING TOWARDS ITALY.

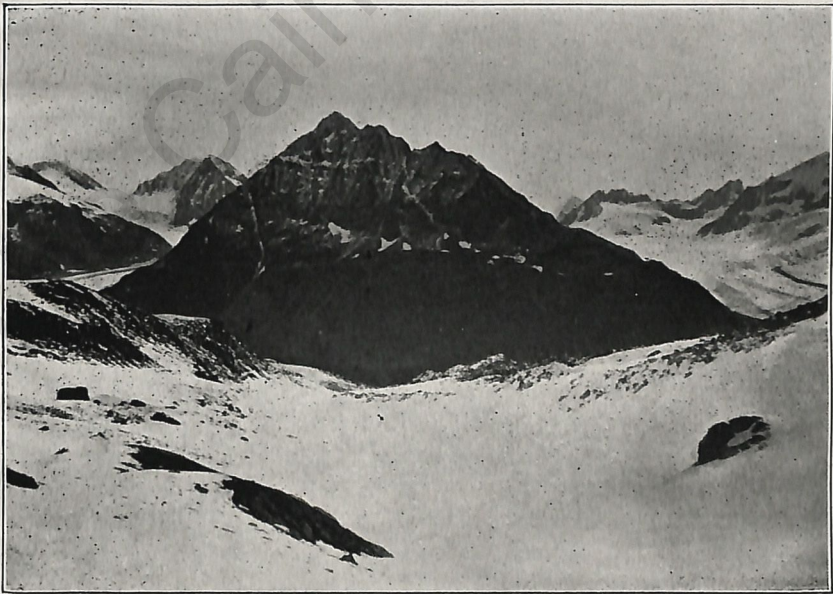


Photo by

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POINT D' OTEMMA,
FROM THE COL DE FENETRE DE BALME.

Fionnay is our resting-place, and a delightful one it is. It is just under 5,000 feet above sea level—an ideal height. A most comfortable home is to be had here, and there are numerous expeditions of all degrees of difficulty. One may scramble on the alpe de Louvie, and if he is careful and patient he may be rewarded by seeing a family of marmots playing like kittens, but the marmots are timid, and as a rule all one can see of them is to hear their whistle, as an Irishman would say. Or one may from the Cabane de Panossière, which is 4,000 feet above Fionnay and a delightful excursion in itself, climb the Grand Combin.

But the sunny south, the land of Italy calls.

We've sent our souls out from the rigid north
To climb the Alpine passes and look forth
Where, looming low, the Lombard rivers lead
To gardens, vineyards—all a dream is worth.

To reach Italy from Fionnay in comfort requires a day and a half. The path leads southward through a delightful valley with the mountains gradually closing in on either side, and about tea-time you reach the last habitation which, Swiss-like, is a comfortable inn. There are few better places for tea than a bench under an Arolla pine in front of the little inn at Mauvoisin, with Mount Pleureur and the Grand Tavé towering above you on opposite sides of the valley. Leaving Mauvoisin, the path leads for some little distance through a deep gorge, down which the Drance fumes and frets. On the left a splendid view is obtained of the Glacier de Giétroz, whose intermittent waterfall is so puzzling, and whose green ice looks in the sunlight like a gigantic crust of almond paste laid with mathematical precision on the top of a huge mass of rock of the colour of plum-cake, and promising a feast for school-boys and their elders till the end of time. It was down from this glacier that in the winter of 1817-18 huge masses of ice fell and dammed the river, which formed a large lake behind the obstruction. In the early summer the lake burst out carrying everything

with it, doing immense damage to life and property as far as Martigny. The country becomes wilder as we proceed, and just short of the Cabane de Chanrion, where we are to spend the night, it becomes steep. The Cabane is just over 8,000 feet and we reach it about seven o'clock—in good time for dinner, which our guide hastens to prepare. It is chilly out of doors, but warm and cheery inside.

Our start was timed for half-past four the following morning, but at three o'clock we were told that a thick mist overhung everything, and our departure was postponed an hour. When we did start the sky was beautifully clear and the stars were just about to disappear. The path, if it can be called a path, led downward for the best part of 1,000 feet, and then crept upward over the Glacier de Fenêtre between Mount Avril and Mount Gelé. What can surpass the crunching of hard snow below one's feet when day is just breaking, when the great architect has already risen and though unseen is gilding the snow summits as with gold-leaf! The Col Fenêtre de Balme, just over 9,000 feet, is in due time reached, and the view should satisfy the most exacting. Mount Blanc is not far off, while the giants about Zermatt and Arolla can all be distinguished. There is no inducement to linger on the top, for a piercing wind is blowing from the north, and we hasten down towards the land of promise and in an hour have second breakfast on a carpet of flowers which the most cunning weaver need never hope to match. The ruby fire of the alpine rose vies with the dazzling blue of the vernal gentian. The least beautiful but not the least plentiful of the flowers was the edelweiss. I never saw it in such profusion.

We are now in Italy and pass a magnificently-attired and heavily-armed gentleman, who might have been a villain from grand opera. We are told that he is a frontier Customs officer, but he takes no interest in us. Our packs promise him little, be he brigand or *douanier*. The path descends by numerous hair-pin turnings along

a stony track, and the sun of the south is over us. On all hands there is evidence of his power. By the time we reach Vaux, we have dropped over 4,000 feet and the heat has become great. I never experienced so rapid a change of temperature. The valley is reached, and although we can get no horse at Ollomont we are able to get a drink. Probably it was as poor wine as any in Italy, and the price lent colour to that, but to three weary and thirsty travellers it was as

A beaker full of the warm South
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim.

There we said Good-bye to our guide, who said he would reach Fionnay that night, and walked on to Valpelline, whence we drove to the beautiful old Roman town of Aosta.