

THE MOUNTAINS OF MACEDONIA.

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“THERE is doubtless a tendency at times to find in landscape a reflection of our own moods and feelings, but the sentiment evoked is one wholly imparted by ourselves.” So runs a note in the last number of the *Cairngorm Club Journal*. I wonder whether in this I can find the full explanation of the fact that the Macedonian landscape, whether of hill or plain, was for the most part to me intensely wearisome and depressing. Was it really the landscape, or was it myself?

It is true that I visited Macedonia in time of war, and as I gazed on those mighty, awesome Belashatza Mountains, I knew that they were a barrier to our men far more formidable than the Bulgarian army. I knew, too, that that vast Struma Plain was the home of myriads of mosquitoes, carrying in their erratic flight the malaria poison. Moreover, it was impossible not to remember that this land had been for centuries the scene of strife and suffering. I suppose that all this must have been in one's subconsciousness, even when one was trying with most impartial judgment to estimate and appreciate how much of beauty and grandeur there was in the landscape. It is possible, therefore, that my verdict may have been only the expression of feelings and memories in my own mind; and yet I scarcely think that this is the whole explanation. I think that the landscape of Macedonia, or as much of it as I know—the part in British occupation—really is wearisome and depressing. The fact is that Nature seems not to have made up her mind what she really wanted there—whether a reproduction of the English Fen country, or something of the character of the Scottish Highlands. Consequently, she has produced both, and scarcely a bit of anything else.

There are many hundreds of square miles of perfectly flat country. The most appalling area of this kind is that through which the Vardar flows. My first sight of this was in the month of March, when, from a slight eminence, I looked out over a hundred square miles of clay! How flat that plain is will be understood when I say that even the Vardar itself cannot find a permanent channel in its course over it. As one travels over it by train, one crosses channel after channel which at one time or another the Vardar has chosen. This Vardar Plain is unquestionably the dreariest expanse of country in Macedonia. There is nothing to relieve it. As one gazed away west, one saw, forty miles away, the Niausta Mountains, but they were too distant to help the landscape. Their ridge was a singularly level one, and even when the sun was shining from the east the mountains somehow remained dark, unrelieved by any variation of colour. Truly, as one looked due west there was no spirit of happiness in the view. And yet from this very same standpoint (the slightly rising ground on the east side of the plain), I saw two sights of most thrilling beauty.

The first was the view of the hills to the east in the light of the setting sun. There was nothing specially noteworthy in the hills themselves. Their height was from 1000 to 2000 feet. Their colours, however, seen in the reflected light of the evening sun, were superb. The varied shades of purple and brown were delightful, and surrounding all was that "pinkiness" which one has often seen in coloured representations of Japanese landscape, but which one had hitherto imagined was mere licence on the part of the artist. The other ever-memorable sight was away to the south-west, where the mystery mountain, Olympus, lifted its head 9500 feet to the sky. I little wonder that the Greeks regarded Olympus as the abode of the gods. It was over sixty miles away, but it was vastly impressive. Usually it presented itself as a mountain summit floating in the air, but almost invariably, when it was visible at all, it

was bathed in a bright light. This was due, of course, to the fact that there is for the greater part of the year a snow cap; but, unquestionably, the effect as seen from a distance is most mysterious. This is heightened by the fact that the mountains to the right of it, the Niausta Mountains, are, as I have said, usually in the shade, dark and sombre; and this applies almost equally to Pelion and Ossa on the left. Sometimes, on exceptionally clear days, one was able to discern a certain amount of detail on Olympus, and then it was very easy for imagination to create a crystal city floating in the heavens, and to believe that the Greeks were right in their thought of this mountain. Sometimes it made its appearance suddenly, and often this sudden appearance was of but short duration. This, of course, was easy of explanation; but it seemed to add to the mystery of the mountain. Later I had the pleasure of passing in the train under the shadow of Olympus, and I was as much impressed by this sight of it as by the distant one, though in a different way. A gradually rising plain separates it from the sea, and then the mountain suddenly rises sheer up, a huge mass of rock, cleft here and there by mighty chasms.

This sudden rising of Olympus from the plain is quite characteristic of the mountains of Macedonia. There is very little merely undulating or moderately hilly country. It is all either monotonous plain or mountainous. This is true of the mountains on the Struma front and the Doiran. On the former, the Beshik Mountains rise quite suddenly from the Langaza Plain, and drop as suddenly on the other side to the Struma Plain. On the latter, the Doiran Lake lies in the middle of a plain surrounded by hills arising quite abruptly out of it.

The journey to the Struma front from Salonika is one never to be forgotten. The road itself, the great Seres road, is a marvel of engineering. Leaving Salonika, it makes straight for the first range of hills, the western spurs of the mountains running down into the Chalcidic

peninsula, the highest points of which are Mounts Chortiatsi (3542 feet), and Kotos (3936 feet.). These hills; at the point where the road crosses them, form no particular barrier, for at no point do they reach a thousand feet in height, and, moreover, nature has obligingly furnished a convenient pass at the desired spot. Descending these hills, we come to the Langaza Plain, and for about eight miles we are again on perfectly flat country. Then the climb begins up the Beshik Mountains. After only a mile or two we have ascended almost 2000 feet, and the rise still continues, though more gradually, until we reach Lahana, 3000 feet. The twistings and turnings of the road over this stretch are quite indescribable. At places the road has been cut out of the shoulder of a hill, and runs round curves so abrupt that one despairs of one's life as the car rushes on. Sometimes the road one has just traversed is in front, and here, there, and everywhere are bridges, cuttings, embankments. At last the highest point at Lahana is reached, and soon one has a wonderful view of the eastern part of the great Struma Plain, with Lake Tahinos. The Plain itself varies, of course, in width; but opposite Seres it is about 15 miles across, and is as flat as the Vardar Plain. On the other side is a glorious range of hills, which rise occasionally to a height of over 6000 feet. These hills, possessing various names at various parts, run with but one break along the Bulgarian frontier to Serbia, and rarely fall below 4000 feet. The one break is the famous Rupel Pass, about the middle of the range, through which the Struma comes down. As one looks on the scene from the vantage ground near Lahana, it is the plain rather than the opposite mountains that attracts one's attention. One can see the Struma winding wearily and uneventfully along the plain, and for the rest it is a wilderness. There are but few trees, and they are small, and there are acres of coarse grass and scrubby bushes. Doubtless it is the thought of what this country might be which

makes the landscape here so wearisome. This plain should be one of the most fertile and beautiful places on the earth; but Nature herself seems indifferent. Nevertheless, this is not one's first impression as one views the landscape. There is always a fascination in a vast extent of country seen from a height, and certainly that is so in this case. One's first feelings were of wonder, and even admiration; but gradually and, I think, inevitably there followed the feeling of disappointment.

I cannot say this, however, of the view I had on the Doiran front. Here I climbed the Baccilli Hills above the railway terminus at Karamudhli—between 2000 and 3000 feet—and from this point the landscape across the valley to the Belashatza hills was thrilling. The valley was comparatively narrow, and the hills, in all their majestic power, were near. They went up precipitously to a sharp and jagged ridge, which for by far the greater part of it was over 4000 feet and occasionally reached 5000 feet. I have no qualifications to make here. The scene was one of absolute grandeur. One who had travelled much told me that it was one of the greatest scenes in the world. I am quite prepared to believe it. Huge headlands of rock to one's right and left, shapeless and terrific, the mountains in front, and a lovely valley below in which Nature seemed to have lavished the gifts she had begrudged elsewhere—this was a scene of great splendour and very satisfying. A short walk along the ridge to the left took one to an entirely different scene, but one scarcely less beautiful. Here was Lake Doiran, surrounded by its hills, and giving an impression of placid beauty far different from Lake Tahinos.

To say, therefore, that there is no glorious landscape in Macedonia would be most untrue. The country generally, however, is disappointing and wearisome. Nature seems most to have desired monotonous plains, but when she thought of hills she made them very wonderful and very mighty.