

A FORTNIGHT IN THE JOTUNHEIM.

BY J. R. LESLIE GRAY.

THE following is an account of a visit I paid a few years ago to this wild and picturesque region, which is not so well known to British travellers and mountaineers as it might be.

Towards the end of June I sailed from Newcastle to Bergen, and on the morning after my arrival left by the Bergen-Oslo train for Myrdal, a village situated in a high-lying valley surrounded by snowy mountains (part of the Hardangerfjeld), down the sides of which descend many waterfalls, varying from 500 to 1,000 feet high. The Hotel Vatnahalsen, where I stayed for a week, stands on the top of a precipitous crag, and like all the other hotels in the interior, is built of wood.

The weather at Myrdal was very unfavourable. Several times I tried to climb the mountains in the vicinity, and on each occasion was turned back by a heavy snowstorm and driving mist. The day before I left the sky cleared, and I had a delightful walk up the valley along the margins of the two lakes which occupy the greater part of its length. On looking over a precipice at the head of the valley I saw a charming picture—a litter of fox cubs enjoying themselves in the unaccustomed warmth. They were rolling over and over, lolling out their red tongues, chasing one another, and playfully pretending to bite.

My next move was to Laerdal, via Flaam. The distance from Vatnahalsen to Flaam is about twelve miles, and the road descends from about 2,400 feet to sea level. The first section consists of an extraordinary zigzag path (like the conventional drawings of a flash of lightning) down a steep bank about 700 feet high. The sail from Flaam to Laerdal was my first on a Norwegian Fjord—the Sogne. The scenery was most impressive, but it is unnecessary for me to try to describe it here, as the Fjords have so often been the subject of more practised pens. On the boat I had some

conversation with a student who was curious to know where I was bound for. I told him I was going to the Jotunheim. He said, "That is nice, but do not die." I replied that I didn't intend to if I could help it, but that I supposed he meant to warn me not to risk getting killed. He said, "Oh, yes, do not get keeled on the mountains." I promised to be very careful. From Laerdal I travelled up the valley of the Laera River by motor bus. On the way I visited a very ancient wooden church (stavekirke), said to have been built about 800 years ago. It looks—and smells—like it: the interior is filled with the odour of antiquity rather than of sanctity.

At Lake Tyin the road terminates, and I embarked on a motor boat for Tyinholmen. The lake is about 3,500 feet above the sea, and the scenery suggests the Arctic Regions. Snow-clad mountains rise to a great height on either side, large snowfields come down to the water's edge, and at that season masses of ice float on the surface. At one place I saw a numerous herd of reindeer, tended by Lapps. I landed at the north end of the lake, and walked across the isthmus which divides Lake Tyin from Lake Bygdin, and constitutes the watershed in that part of the country. I stayed for the night in the hotel at Eidsbugaren at the west end of Lake Bygdin. Near the hotel there is a monolith erected to the memory of Aasmund O. Vinje, the poet, sometimes called the Norwegian Burns, also a cottage which was formerly his shooting lodge, and is now turned into a sort of memorial museum.

Next morning I sailed to the other end of Lake Bygdin, and put up at the Bygdin High Mountain Hotel. The weather had now greatly improved, and I got a good deal of walking and climbing. My first ascent was to the top of the Bitihorn, 5,250 feet, which is about a mile south of the hotel. From the summit, looking north, there is a superb view of the peaks and glaciers of the Jotunheim. That is probably the finest prospect of the kind on the Continent north of the Alps. The mountains are intermediate in elevation between the Alps and the Grampians. The two highest summits, Glittertind and Galdhøpiggen, both over

8,000 feet, are rather more than half as high as Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa, and rather less than twice as high as Ben Nevis and Ben Macdhui. The chief glory of the Jotunheim is its glaciers, such mighty masses as the Hestbrae and the Memurubrae being much more impressive than, for example, the Mer de Glace and the Glacier des Bossons.

Next day I climbed the Synshorn, about 4,800 feet, which rises just behind the hotel on the north side, and the following three or four days were occupied in ridge walking on the range which runs parallel to the northern margin of the lake. Here it is possible to walk for miles over rough rocks and extensive snow-beds without descending below 5,000 feet. Being in very good condition after all this exercise, I resolved to attempt the ascent of Kalvaahögda, about 7,200 feet, the highest peak in the neighbourhood. This mountain stands in much the same position relatively to Lake Bygdin as Ben Lawers to Loch Tay, but the gneissose rocks of Kalvaahögda are far more rugged than the Ben Lawers schists. Here I have to record a failure and sound a warning note. The official map of the Jotunheim, otherwise a good one, shows an unbroken path along the northern margin of Lake Bygdin. Therein it misleads the traveller, for there is no real path, and the shore is intersected in several places by unfordable torrents. I walked along the shingly strand for miles until I came to the first of these torrents, which cut me off hopelessly from the main mass of Kalvaahögda. To reach it entailed a tremendous detour over ground nearly as rough as the Larig Ghru at the Pools of Dee, with an ascent of about 2,500 feet. This I accomplished, but found that I was still about 1,300 feet below the summit, with a large snowfield and some very bad rocks before me. In spite of this I might have got to the top, but if I had done so I would not have been back at the hotel before midnight. That would not have mattered much, as at that time of the year there is practically no darkness in Norway, but I had visions of our worthy host organizing search parties, so I sorrowfully retraced my steps. Advice to those about to climb Kalvaahögda—get on to the ridge immediately behind the hotel at once, and keep as high as

possible the whole way. Success will then be assured, if you are fortunate in the weather.

A day or two later I returned to Eidsbugaren, and the next day ascended the Uraanasbrae. This is a true glacier—that is proved by the greenish-white colour of the water at the western end of Lake Bygdin—but owing to its gradual slope it is hardly crevassed at all, and resembles a vast snowfield rather than a glacier. From the lake to the summit the distance is about six miles, and on this occasion the surface of the glacier was covered with a recent coating of soft, wet snow, which made the ascent rather toilsome, as the climber sank knee-deep in the unpleasant slush at every step, but the toil was more than repaid by the view from the summit, over 6,000 feet, of mountains (some of them veritable aiguilles), and great glaciers and snowfields.

Next morning I motored back to Laerdal, sailed from thence to Gudvangen, and ascended the wonderful Stalheim Gorge, which reminded me of Glen Einich, but is even grander and more profound. From Stalheim I motored to Vossevangen, a neat little town situated on a lake famous alike for its beauty and its trout, and so back to Bergen and home across the North Sea.

Norway is without doubt a magnificent country, and its people are worthy of it. As Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, they are "indeed honest and of an open and free nature." The two best books on mountaineering in Norway are "Norway and its Glaciers," by Principal J. D. Forbes, and "Norway, the Northern Playground," by William Cecil Slingsby. Of course transport and accommodation have been much improved since those works were published.