

PEAKS AND PASTURES.

BY R. L. MITCHELL.

AMONGST the excursions arranged for the students of the agricultural department of the Swiss Technical High School in Zürich, to which I was lucky enough to be invited, was one to the region south of the St Gotthard. While the main object was to examine the agricultural practices of the lower slopes, opportunity was taken to visit the high alps and summit ridges in the neighbourhood. The party, comprising some twenty students and three foreign *Mitarbeiter* and led, occasionally, by three professors, travelled regally by reserved third-class coach and at a very advantageous rate from Zürich to Göschenen by the early morning express to Milan, then by a local train through the St Gotthard Tunnel to Airolo. The trip from Lucerne, along the lake and up the Reuss valley to Göschenen, proved as interesting as a train journey can be, especially in its later stages, with its bird's-eye views of the villages on the hill-spurs, and, near Wassen, the corkscrew tunnel whose exit is 100 feet above the entrance. And, a few miles farther on, a section of the hillside is traversed at three different levels by the railway—twice in a southerly direction and once northerly. But, at this stage, the line has serpented so often that one refuses to believe the evidence of the compass.

So, having made good use of the half-hour's wait at Göschenen by partaking of the soup course of our lunch, we eventually reached Italian-speaking Switzerland at Airolo. Our first concern was to complete lunch, but we found that first of all our programme included the ascent of 1,000 feet to Nante, a tiny village at the upper limit of cultivation, where one of the professors ran a small croft. Our headquarters for the night were to be here—the main party accommodated on straw mattresses in the now disused school-room and the privileged guests in the loft of the professor's house.

Situated in the Valle Levantina, the upper section of the Ticino valley, at a height of 4,678 feet, Nante loses the last of the winter's snows only in May, and in the short season potatoes and similar crops are grown to augment the products of Alpine dairying. Examination of the processes employed, under the guidance of the "potato professor," as our leader was greeted in Italian by the villagers, occupied the remainder of the day, there being included a short excursion to the Alpe Piscium, a cleared terrace high above the village to which, in summer, part of the village herd is taken. These alps, level stretches of rough pasture on the hill-flanks, vary in size from a few yards across to a mile or more, each generally with its hut for milking and cheese-making. Their location is easily determined, for the metallic clanging of the cow-bells can be heard from afar.

From the pine-clad slopes above the village an excellent impression was obtained of the Levantina valley. Southwards down the valley, road, railway, and river cross and re-cross on their way towards the plains of North Italy. But above Airolo they part company, the Ticino reaching back westwards to Val Bedretto and its headwaters, the railway disappearing abruptly into the hillside, and the road zigzagging upwards towards the St Gotthard Pass and Andermatt. This part of the route from the south presents the first difficult obstacle to any intruder, and is heavily fortified—evidence of entrenchments being visible all over the hill-face above Airolo, whilst signs of practice were to be found on the slopes which we traversed above Nante, reminding us that even in these apparently safe and peaceable surrounds war might suddenly be upon us.

The difficulties of a bilingual, or still more of a trilingual, country were emphasised that evening when the party adjourned to the village inn. Rumour amongst the students has it that, on a previous visit, the German-speaking professor ordered, as was his wont, a *dreier* of wine. The lady of the house, whose German stretched as far as *eins, zwei, drei*, supplied three litres, ten times the appropriate amount, much to the delight of the audience and consternation of the recipient. The fate of the Chianti is not recorded,

but, in any case, the care with which the victim had his order interpreted on this occasion lent support to the rumour.

The hostess has a further official duty, that of tolling the village bell, and at 4.30 next morning she wakened us thus in good time for our day's excursion. The plan was to make our way to the head of the Sassello Pass, a mountain track connecting the Ticino valley with the neighbouring Maggia valley, noting on the way the changes in vegetation and so on. I am afraid, however, that after the first hour or so this side of the trip was practically forgotten and it had degenerated into something very like a Club excursion, even to the advance guard, the stragglers, and those who rested while the others bagged another top!

The Sassello Pass route leads from Airolo, or from Piota, farther down the valley, by way of the extensive Alpe Prato, over the sharp ridge connecting Pizzo Sassello to Sambuco at a height of 7,700 feet, then even more steeply down through Alpe Sassello to Corte and the Maggia valley. The track continues beyond Corte down to Fusio, where the road from Locarno and the south comes to an end. By half-past five we were on our way along the rough path through the pines above the cultivated slopes. After a mile or so eastwards down the valley we struck uphill, and finally emerged from the trees into the clearing of Alpe Prato. At this point we left the usual route, which led directly across the alp towards the lowest point of the ridge, and made a detour to inspect a small corrie loch lying to our left at the foot of the cliffs at that part of the ridge. Passing through a series of terraces we reached the loch at about 8 o'clock. Even at this hour some members of the party felt inclined to bathe, as the June sun was already beating down mercilessly and the shade temperature well over 70°. Wiser counsels prevailed as far as bathing was concerned, for the water itself was ice cold, and even yet some lingering snow-fields on the steep-shaded screes reached down to the water's edge.

Our route now led back to the main path over an extensive field of firm snow, down which the unintentional descent for a few yards of one member of the party caused some

amusement. The path had now become little more than a scramble over large boulders, and so we ascended the last thousand feet or so to arrive panting at the pass level. The ridge itself was quite sharp, with in places a narrow slightly sloping ledge, but generally falling away more steeply to the south than to the north, whence we had come. Finding what shade we could behind the huge blocks of rock, we consumed some of our provisions for the day.

The more energetic members now set off to climb from the pass level at 7,700 feet to the summit of Pizzo Sassello (8,300 feet) about half a mile to the west. The first part of the ascent was over boulders, followed by a scramble up an inclined face of rotten rock, with loose soil and mosses in the cracks—easily climbed but just steep enough to demand care in places. The panorama from the top repaid the energy expended, even in the intense heat (by midday the temperature had reached 80° in the shade). Still before noon, the heat haze was not too far developed, although the distance had not the same crystal clarity of the early morning, and a far dark mass of cloud was threatening on the horizon.

The whole horizon was a tumbled mass of peaks, and only the most outstanding could be picked out. To the north lay the St Gotthard group, and, while Airolo was hidden in the depths of the valley, the road was clearly visible, zigzagging up the pass towards the hospice. Four thousand five hundred feet right below us, a little farther down the valley, the twin villages of Valle and Madrano, situated where the Canaria meets the Levantina, appeared as specks on the valley floor. Above them stretched the reclaimed terrace-like slopes reaching up into the pine forests, which in turn stopped short on attaining the upper tree limit, leaving the apparently desolate boulder-strewn upper ridges. The snow-capped Rheinwaldhorn was outstanding, south of which the distant view was interrupted by the mass of Sambuco, 300 feet higher than Sassello and 3 miles distant. To the west lay a whole array of scarcely distinguishable summits, while near at hand the impressive valley of the Maggia emerged from the Cristallina Alps. Far in the distance a symmetrical snow-covered cone appeared

right above the valley, probably the Finsteraarhorn, the nearest of the Bernese Alps.

The descent to the pass level safely accomplished, we flanked the east face of the peak, over the boulders once again, then by mixed country to the loch above the Alpe Ravina. Here the party enjoyed a bathe, the temperature of the water being slightly higher than that of the loch previously visited, although here, too, large snow-fields still lay near at hand. All enjoyed the bathe except one professor, for the bearer of his rucksack, with his bathing attire, had strayed on the descent and was nowhere to be found. A brief halt and we were on our way down the final slopes to Nante, where the lost bathing costume awaited us. By a lucky chance the custodian, quite new to the district and rather shortsighted, had made a direct descent to Nante by practically the only feasible route when he might just as easily have finished in an adjoining valley.

Nante to Airolo was accomplished in good time even for a Swiss descent, for the doctrine, at least in the groups with which I was associated, was slow up and fast down. For the last hour thunder had been rumbling and the clouds banking up. As we reached Airolo the rain started—a real Alpine thunderstorm with an hour's torrential rain. It cleared up to a cool, clear summer evening for our trip down the Reuss valley and beside the several lakes on the way to Zürich.