

## IMPRESSIONS OF AUSTRIA.

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EITHER nature forgot about Spring in 1947, or decided that there would be no time for both Spring and Summer in Austria. At any rate the final thaw did not start until the end of April, and on Whit Monday we were bathing in a loch more than 4,500 feet up in the Hochschwab plateau in northern Styria.

We had been given a long week-end, and on Saturday afternoon took to the road. We were experienced hitch-hikers, and anything from a " jeep " to a ten-ton truck was gratefully accepted, provided it was British. Civilian cars and lorries we preferred to ignore, as lack of spare parts and maintenance, and generally, great age, gave them a decidedly unsafe appearance.

We spent the night with a sub-unit at Bruck, and on Sunday morning, eleven strong, sallied forth in two fifteen-hundredweight trucks towards the hills. We left the main Vienna road at Kapfenberg, following a road made familiar by many previous climbing outings. Just before the little village of Aflenz we again turned off to the left. A description of this road beyond the point at which we left it is tempting. Past Aflenz the country opens out into rich green fields and thick pine woods on which the sun seemed always to be shining from the bluest of skies. The road, lined with stocky fruit-trees, reaches away into the distance—past white-washed or strong wooden houses, an occasional wayside shrine, white and carefully tended, and sometimes a rugged wooden crucifix standing clean against the blue sky, scoured by the weather, its very timbers—the cracked and rain-whitened figure, the warped cross and bending canopy—symbolic of endurance and strength. After a few miles, fields surrender to steep hill-slopes on which conifers thrive and the snow lies, and so the road comes to Seewiesen at the bottom of the Seeberg Pass. As it struggles through towering trees, zigzagging across the face of the hill, a



rough grey crag rises to the sky behind, like the crest of a petrified wave swept from the Seetal far below, and sinks beneath the pines as the track heaves itself over the summit of the pass. On the other side the road winds along the bank of a clear, snow-fed stream, before starting the ascent round smooth slopes, past a wooden ski-jumping platform into the little village of Mariazell. This village, popular as a winter sports centre, is best known for its magnificent Austrian baroque church.

To return, however, to the point at which we left the Mariazell road: we turned off at Thörl, a small village dominated by the gaunt ruin of a castle clinging precariously to a dark rock, the black holes that had been windows peering like eye-holes from a weather-worn skull. We left this rather awe-inspiring scene on a track which winds along a green pine valley for several miles until, having jolted across a barren waste of stones from which struggle tough beech trees, we arrived at Bodenbauer, almost 3,000 feet above the sea. This is a "Gasthof" situated beneath the battlemented cliffs of a buttress of the south-eastern part of the Hochschwab, and can be translated "The floor of the bird-cage." This translation is certainly apt, as the Inn is almost surrounded by seemingly vertical ribbed cliffs rising from a flat grass- and gravel-patched bottom. Whether it is as accurate, I don't know.

We gave the rations we had brought with us to the inn-keeper's wife, and soon had a meal consisting of tinned soup followed by tinned stew, tinned potatoes and tinned peas, and rounded off with tinned steam-pudding and untinned (hurrah!) custard. After a very good cup of coffee and a tinned cigarette we felt obliged to have a long walk.

We decided to climb Reudelstein, (4,745 feet), one of the lesser hills of the group, which rises on the north side of the valley. The lower slopes were thickly covered by pine trees through which we climbed for about an hour. While among these we had no view, but once we had broken through into a clear space, a breath-taking scene was presented to us. We saw the same sweeping rocks which had looked so impressive from below, but now they seemed even higher



as they soared above us on the opposite side of a deep narrow valley completely devoid of life of any sort—nothing but silver-grey rock and trickling scree. We continued to the top of the hill where we sat down on the bony trunk of a long-dead tree, and watched, almost felt the veil of dusk being drawn nearly imperceptibly over the cliffs, deepening the black cracks in the ramparts of rock. The whole air was held rapt in that mystical cool twilight silence, perfect silence, which absorbs, as soon as made, any sound: the far-away click of a stone bounding down the cliff, or an occasional word. We sat for a long time gazing over a scene, and entranced by an atmosphere which the most eloquent poetry would fail to describe, keenly aware of the magnificent simplicity and majestic innocence of Nature, immense and spacious, itself knowing nothing of the complicated littleness and whirl of human civilisation.

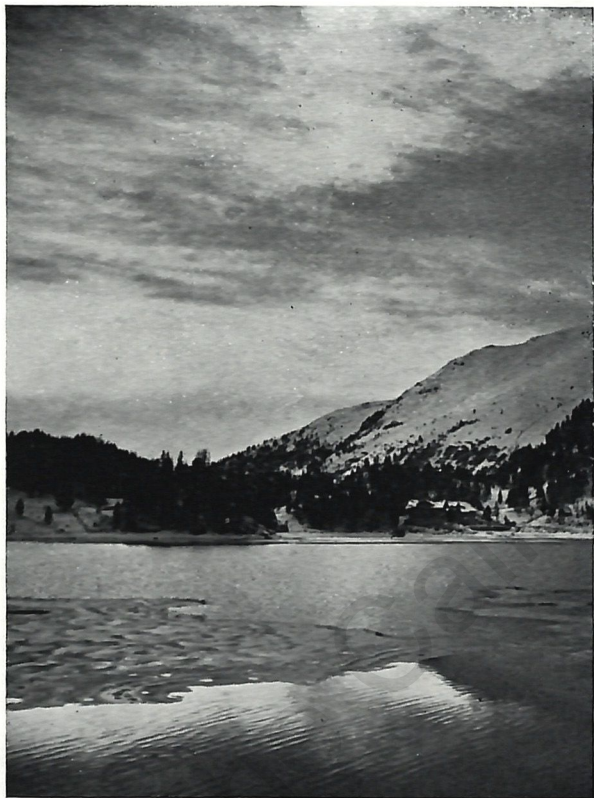
The glow of a cigarette-end was a reminder that it would soon be too dark to find our way back comfortably, so we set out for the house. Groping through prickly branches and stumbling over unseen sticks and stones, tolerantly at first, but soon swearing under our breath at the unseen roots which seemed to want us to kick our toes through our boots, and cursing the twigs that scratched our faces, the high-souled sentiments we had just experienced were bashed out of us, and we realised that we were still very much on earth.

The warm tobacco haze, and the low room lit only by a big log-fire round which the others were sitting with frothy glasses, gave us a comfortable welcome. Perhaps "human civilisation" wasn't so bad after all, we thought.

In the morning we were wakened by beams of sunlight streaming through the open windows. The cool morning air, the rustling silence, and the dew-drops glistening on the grass would not let us lie in bed long, and before the sun was very high we had all breakfasted.

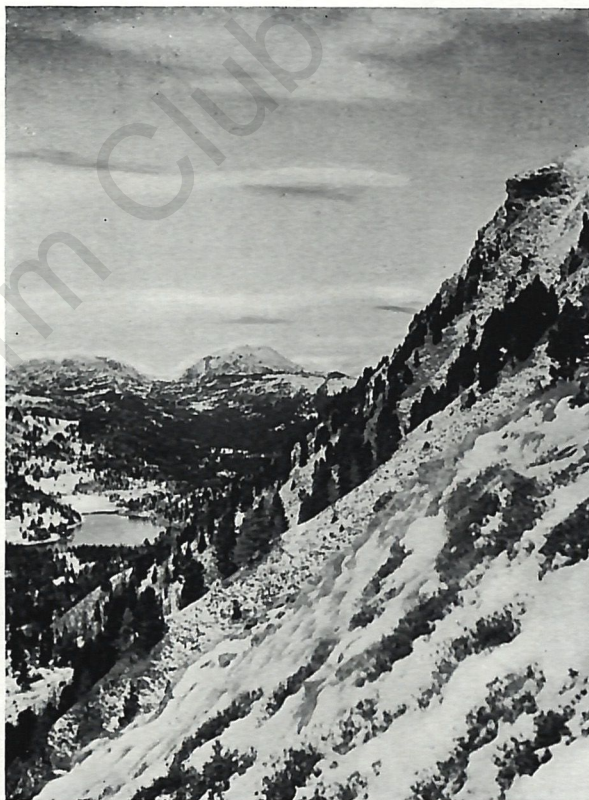
We had decided the evening before to climb up out of the "bird-cage" on to the Sonnschienalm plateau, wend our way across to the Sonnschienhütte, which we had used as a base on many previous week-ends, climb Ebenstein, and take some photographs. The Sonnschienalm is situated





*D. Mark Nicol*

TURRACHER SEE FROM LEAVE CENTRE



*D. Mark Nicol*

TURRACHER SEE FROM SCHOBERNEGEL



on the south-west edge of the main Hochschwab massif, an offshoot of the Niedere Tauern. Fascinating names and deep dark valleys, brilliant snow-patched tops and tumbling cliffs, barren scree on the north, and green slopes, sunny hollows and a few great-rooted spruce in the south give it an irresistible attraction.

So we set out for the day just before eight o'clock, with a few sandwiches, and were soon slanting up the wall at the head of the valley along a zigzag path. As the sun rose, the heat in the narrow cleft into which we had climbed became tremendous, and a good deal of sweat was shed, and all possible clothes were cast. Occasionally we sat down on a patch of dried-up grass, and oozed under the blazing sun, watching the widening view and the shimmering outline of the cliffs with the trees clinging to them, and feeling the heat of the ground warming us from underneath. Having reached the top and undergone this cooking on both sides for a few minutes, we pushed on again.

After a climb of 2,000 feet we were overlooking a rocky saucer-like depression about a quarter of a mile wide. Diametrically opposite each other in this hollow we saw two groups of huts with shingled roofs and rough rubble walls, each hut covering about as much ground as the Corrou Bothy, only much lower. During the summer, cowherds live here, and we were given many an excellent mug of fresh milk by these shy but friendly people. The two clusters of huts are called Sackwiesen and Hauslalm.

Our path took us past Hauslalm, over the north lip of the saucer and along the hill slope on the south bank of the Sackwiesensee which nestles, a dark pool, beneath the sunny walls of Seemauer. When we came in sight of the loch, we realized just how hot it was under the mid-day sun, and the decision to bathe and its realisation were almost simultaneous. The water was cold, but not breathtaking, and very refreshing. Unfortunately, and belying the appearance of the loch, there was a lot of evil-smelling vegetaceous mud on the bottom which we kicked up as we swam, and when we eventually climbed out to bask on the bank, each of us stank like a good midden. However, we moved round to



a part of the loch beneath the cliffs which had a stonier bed, and by swimming in a very gentle breast-stroke to avoid disturbing the bottom, managed to render ourselves reasonably fragrant. Three of us changed our minds about going to the Sonnschienhütte, and scrambled on the cliff instead. We did no hard climbing, but got some fine views over the loch to the Sonnschienalm, Griesmauer, and the hills to the east.

We got back to Bodenbauer just as the sun was disappearing behind the cliffs, and after a huge meal consisting of all the rations we had left, returned to Bruck, and so to Graz.

So the summer passed. When we were unable to climb our spare time was pleasantly occupied by fishing. In October, reports of snow in the Carinthian hills began to come in, and with them thoughts of ski-ing and local leave. In November, after a certain amount of form-filling and "handing-over," two of us managed to arrange ten days at Turracher Höhe, on the border of western Styria and north Carinthia.

We left Graz dry and snowless, but arrived in Klagenfurt the next morning to find snow falling and the ground deep in slush—not just what we had hoped for, but at least snow of sorts. Having breakfasted we climbed into a truck and set off again. The snow became dryer as we rose gradually along a narrow road which crept across a shivering white landscape under a snowing sky, a view which seemed all the colder because of the draught which whistled through chinks in the canvas canopy of the truck, and bit into our fingers and toes. But by the time we had reached Ebene Reichenau, where we had to change into a more powerful truck, a "peep," the sun was out and the snow glistened and shone. Eventually the "peep" arrived, heavily chained, and took us up the last five miles in its lowest gear, its nose pointing to the sky the whole way. Our arrival on the plateau was most exhilarating. On each side of the loch rose snow-covered slopes specked with trees, which thinned out as they climbed, leaving pure white summits shining dazzlingly against a deep blue sky. In front, to the north, a brilliantly white hill, Gross Königstuhl, rose from a carpet of distant pines into the cold crystal clear air.



The O.R.s' leave centre is set back the width of a narrow road from the edge of the little Turracher See, with the hillside rising directly behind. The long narrow dining-room occupies almost all the front of the building, its windows overlooking the lake. Our small but comfortable room also looked on to the water. The food was excellent, and there was, customarily, a small but well-stocked bar. It was a pleasant surprise to find that this luxurious board was going to cost us sixpence a day. (When the N.C.O. in charge told us this, my companion made some unpleasant and coolly-received remark about this being the place for Aberdonians.)

In the morning we walked round the lake to the equipment store near the officers' house. Here there were skis and all imaginable varieties of clothing to enable one to ski in comfort. We selected skis and the instructor fitted them for us, and showed us the place best suited to our limited ability. We spent a very pleasant day, although the snow, as the instructor had forecast, was pretty damp latterly.

Dinner was more than welcome, the sharp air having given us huge appetites. After the meal we sat in the dark-timbered dining-room looking over the lake. The lights of the house on the opposite side winked in dimpled streaks on the water, and the dark silhouette of the hills rose on the far side against a sky only a little less dark.

The other visitors were two A.T.S. who were very good skiers, two R.A.O.C. men from Vienna, and a Royal Ulster Rifleman who spent most of his time teaching the table-maid how to play table-tennis.

In the morning the R.A.O.C. men took us up the hill on the other side of the lake where they had been ski-ing the day before, but we had to return to the house for lunch, as the snow had deteriorated rapidly, and ski-ing was damp and unpleasant, and here and there a stone stuck out dangerously.

So the next day there was no ski-ing, and we walked down to the village of Turrach, which nestles in the valley on the north side of the Turracher Höhe. The village is nothing more than a cluster of houses and large wooden



huts, with a couple of inns, a church, and a water-powered saw-mill from which most of the inhabitants probably draw their living. Having seen such of the village as there was, we tracked down some music and singing to one of the inns. The local inhabitants could never have seen a British soldier before, for when we entered, the singers stopped their song and stared, the music staggered and faded, and we had a most unpleasant feeling that it was going to stop entirely, and leave us the centre of interest in a curious silence. To our great relief, however, the accordion player regained his strength, and the singing restarted. A girl approached us rather timidly, dressed, like all the other occupants of the room, in Styrian costume, and we ordered some beer. The party soon got under weigh again, the merriment increased as glasses were drained, and after we had sat half-an-hour, they started to dance. They swirled around with much stamping of boots and slapping of legs, the accordion puffed out its jerky Styrian tune, the less sober of the dancers swayed at times somewhat precariously, the less tipsy cast an occasional self-conscious grin in our direction, as if saying, "What do the Englanders think of this?"

When, about four o'clock, we discovered that we were becoming even merrier than the very merry atmosphere of the party justified, we decided that it was about time we were starting for home. In three and a half hours we were back in the house, marvellously tired.

The rest of our leave was spent on the surrounding hills, Rinseneck (7,566 feet) and Schoberriegel (7,488 feet), occupying the best part of a day each. We had fine views from both; the hills on the Yugoslav and Italian borders in the south were very impressive, their jagged tops rising from a sea of cloud to be blackly silhouetted against a golden sky, and in the north and north-west the Styrian and Salzburg hills appeared snowy and clear.

The last day it rained heavily, and in spite of the fact that, "It's heresy to deny that all weather's climbing weather," we did not go out. In the morning we handed in our skis and clothes, and, as we had to leave at 6 A.M. the following day, packed up our kit-bags, stowed away



our boots, shaved for the first time since our arrival, and realized that we were not going to like leaving this place.

In the afternoon we sat in the dining-room and read. From the well-varied stock of "Penguins" held by the hotel, I chose "The Adventures of the Young Soldier in Search of the Better World," and could not help feeling that here there were two who had found a very pleasant world for ten days; and it was very reluctantly that we returned to being "Red-Tape Worms" on the morrow.