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Untrodden peaks and unfrequented valleys

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Preface

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PREFACE.

THE district described in the following pages occupies that part of South-eastern Tyrol which lies between Botzen, Bruneck, Innichen, and Belluno. Within the space thus roughly indicated are found those remarkable lime-stone mountains called the Dolomites.

Till within the last six or eight years—that is to say, till the publication of Ball's Guide to the Eastern Alps in 1868, and the appearance of Messrs. Gilbert and Churchill's joint volume in 1864,—the Dolomite district was scarcely known even by name to any but scientific travellers. A few geologists found their way now and then to Predazzo; a few artists, attracted in the first instance to Cadore, as the birth-place of Titian, carried their sketch-books up the Ampezzo Thal; but there it ended. Even now, the general public is so slightly informed upon the subject that it is by no means uncommon to find educated persons who have never heard of the Dolomites at all, or who take them for a religious sect, like the Mormons or the Druses.

Nor is this surprising when we consider the nature of the ground lying within the area just named; the absence of roads; the impossibility of traversing the heart of the country, except on foot or on mule-back; the tedious postal arrangements; the want of telegraphic communication; and the primitive quality of the accommodation provided for travellers. A good road is the widest avenue to knowledge; but there is at present only one good and complete road in the whole district—namely, the *Strada Regia*, which, traversing the whole length of the *Ampezzo Thal*, connects the Venetian provinces with Lower Austria. Other fragments of roads there are; but then they are only fragments, leading sometimes from point to point within an amphitheatre of mountains traversed only by mule-tracks.

When, however, one has said that there are few roads—that letters, having sometimes to be carried by walking postmen over a succession of passes, travel slowly and are delivered irregularly—that the inns are not only few and far between, but often of the humblest kind—and that, except at Cortina, there is not a telegraph station in the whole country, one has said all there is to say in disparagement of the district. For the rest, it is difficult to speak of the people, of the climate, of the scenery, without risk of being thought too partial or too enthusiastic. To say that the arts of extortion are here unknown—that the old patri-

archal notion of hospitality still survives, miraculously, in the minds of the inn-keepers—that it is as natural to the natives of these hills and valleys to be kind, and helpful, and disinterested, as it is natural to the Swiss to be rapacious—that here one escapes from hackneyed sights, from overcrowded hotels, from the dreary routine of *table d'hôtes*, from the flood of Cook's tourists,—is, after all, but to say that life in the South-eastern Tyrol is yet free from all the discomforts that have of late years made Switzerland unendurable; and that for those who love sketching and botany, mountain-climbing and mountain air, and who desire when they travel to leave London and Paris behind them, the Dolomites offer a “playground” far more attractive than the Alps.

That a certain amount of activity and some power to resist fatigue, are necessary to the proper enjoyment of this new playground, must be conceded from the beginning. The passes are too long and too fatiguing for ladies on foot, and should not be attempted by any who cannot endure eight and sometimes ten hours of mule-riding. The food and cooking, as will be seen in the course of the following narrative, are for the most part indifferent; and the *albergos*, as I have already said, are often of the humblest kind. The beds, however, in even “the worst inn's worst room” are generally irreproachable; and this alone covers a multitude of shortcomings. Anyone who visited Ober-

Ammergau during the last performances of the Passion Play can form a tolerably exact idea of the sort of accommodation to be met with at Cortina, Caprile, Primiero, Predazzo, Paneveggio, Corfara, and St. Ulrich. A small store of tea, arrowroot, and Liebig's extract, a bottle or two of wine and brandy, a flask of spirits of wine and an Etna, are almost indispensable adjuncts to a lengthened tour in these mountains. The basket which contains them adds but little to the impedimenta, and immensely to the well-being of the traveller.

For ladies, side-saddles are absolutely necessary, there being only two in the whole country, and but one of these for hire. There is no need to take them out all the way from England. They can always be bought at the last large town through which travellers pass on their way to the Dolomites, and sold again at the first they come to on leaving the district.

Some knowledge of Italian and German is also indispensable. French here is of no use whatever; and Italian is almost universally spoken. It is only in the Grödner Thal, the Gader Thal, and the country north of the Ampezzo, that one comes upon a purely German population.

The Dolomite district is most easily approached from either Venice, Botzen, or Bruneck; the nearest railway stations being Toblach on the north, Atzwang on the west, and Conegliano on the south. All that

is grandest, all that is most attractive to the artist, the geologist, and the Alpine climber, lies midway between these three points, and covers an area of about thirty-five miles by fifty. The scenes which the present writer has attempted to describe, all lie within that narrow radius.

A word ought, perhaps, to be said with regard to the Title of this book, which, at first hearing, may be taken to promise more than the author is prepared to fulfil. But it means simply that here in South Tyrol, within seventy-two hours of London, there may be found a large number of yet "untrodden peaks," and a network of valleys so literally "unfrequented" that we journeyed sometimes for days together without meeting a single traveller either in the inns or on the roads, and encountered only three parties of English during the whole time between entering the country on the Conegliano side and leaving it at Botzen.

Of these unascended Dolomites, many exceed 10,000 feet in height; and some—as the Cima di Fradusta, the Palle di San Martino and the Sass Maor—are so difficult, that the mountaineer who shall first set foot upon their summits will have achieved a feat in no way second to that of the first ascent of the Matterhorn.

Of the nature and origin of Dolomite much has been written and much conjectured by French and German geologists; but nothing as yet seems defini-

tively proved. The Coral Reef theory of Baron Richt-hofen seems, however, to be gaining general acceptance, and to the unscientific reader sounds sufficiently conclusive. He grounds his theory upon certain facts, such as:—

1. The singular isolation of these mountains, many of which stand detached and alone, falling away steeply on all sides in a way that cannot be the result of any process of denudation.

2. The presence in their substance of such marine deposits as are found in the same position in the Coral Reefs now in progress of formation in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and on the Australian coast-line.

3. The absence of all deep-sea deposits.

4. The absence of all trace of volcanic origin.

5. The peculiarity of their forms, which reproduce in a remarkable manner the forms of the Coral Reef "Atolls" of the present day, being vertical, like huge walls, towards the wash of the tide, and supported on the lee side by sloping buttresses.

6. Their lines of curvature, and the kind of enclosures which they fence in; so again reproducing the construction of the Coral Reefs, which thus embay spaces of shallow water.

7. Finally the multiform evidences (too numerous to be dwelt upon here) of how the Dolomite must have been slowly and steadily superimposed during

long ages upon lower original beds of other rock, and the difficulty of accounting for this process by any other hypothesis.

"The Schlern," says Richthofen, taking this for his representative mountain, "is a Coral Reef; and the entire formation of Schlern Dolomite has in like manner originated through animal activity."*

The Dolomite derives its name from that of Monsieur Dolomieu, an eminent French savant of the last century, who travelled in South Tyrol somewhere about the years 1789 and 1790, and first directed the attention of the scientific world towards the structural peculiarities of this kind of limestone.

For the rest, although I have endeavoured to give a strictly faithful account of this Dolomite country, I cannot but feel that those who wish to do justice to the beauty of its scenery must visit these mountains and valleys for themselves. No descriptions, no sketches** of mine, can, of necessity, convey any adequate impression of forms so new and so fantastic—of colouring so splendid—of atmospheric effects so unusual and so startling. To do so would need, at all events, an abler pen and a more skilful pencil than mine. When I ask myself how and by whom such scenes could be depicted, then, my dear Ameri-

* I am indebted to Mr. G. C. Churchill's admirable "Physical Description of the Dolomite District" for the particulars epitomized above.

** The illustrations attached to the original work are necessarily omitted in the present edition.

can Friends to whom this book is inscribed—then I think of you and your art. I wish, VEDDER, that I could seize the weirdness and poetry of that landscape as you would have seized it; that I could match the relative tones of mountains, trees, and skies, CHARLES CARYLL COLEMAN, with your wonderful fidelity; that like you, TILTON, I could steep my brush in the rose and gold of Southern sunsets. Thus, and thus only, should the Dolomites be painted.

AMELIA B. EDWARDS.

WESTBURY-ON-TRYM,
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