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Untrodden peaks and unfrequented valleys

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Chapter I. Monte Generoso to Venice

UNTRODDEN PEAKS AND UNFREQUENTED VALLEYS.

CHAPTER I.

MONTE GENEROSO TO VENICE.

Hotel at Monte Generoso—Wonderful Panorama—Dreams about Dolomites—Difficulties—The redoubtable Courier—The Rev. John R.—Choice of Routes—Mendrisio to Como—Como Cathedral—Fellow Travellers on board the Steamer—Bellaggio—Lecco to Bergamo, Post-haste—Panoramic Scenery by Rail—Venice under a new Aspect—We lay in Store of Provisions for the coming Journey—The Question of Side-saddles—Ready to Start.

AN autumn in North Italy, a winter in Rome, a spring-tide in Sorrento, brought summer round again—the rich Italian summer, with its wealth of fruits and flowers, its intolerable heat, and its blinding brightness. The barbarian tide had long ago set northwards and overflowed into Switzerland. Even those who had lingered longest were fain at last to turn their faces towards the hills; and so it happened that the writer and a friend who had joined her of late in Naples, found themselves, about the middle of June, 1872, breathing the cooler airs of Monte Generoso.

Here was a pleasant hotel, filled to overflowing, and numbering among its guests many Roman friends,

of the past season. Here, too, were green slopes, and shady woods, and meadows splendid with such wild flowers as none of us had ever seen elsewhere. The steaming lakes, from which we had just escaped—Como, Lugano and Maggiore—lay in still, shining sheets three thousand feet below. The vast Lombard flats on the one side simmered all day in burning mists to the farthest horizon. The great snow-ranges bounding Switzerland and Tyrol on the other, glowed with the rose of every dawn, and turned purple when the sun went down behind them in glory every evening.

Having this wondrous panorama constantly before our eyes, with its changing lights and shadows, and its magical effects of cloud-wreath and shower—catching now a sudden glimpse of the Finster Aär Horn and the Bernese range—now an apparitional vision of Monte Rosa, or the Matterhorn, or even (on a clear morning, from the summit behind the hotel) of the far-distant Ortler Spitze on the Tyrolese border—we began, somehow, to think and talk less of our proposed tour in the Engadine; to look more and more longingly towards the north-eastern horizon; and to dream in a vague way of those mystic mountains beyond Verona which we knew of, somewhat indefinitely, as the Dolomites.

The Dolomites! It was full fifteen years since I had first seen sketches of them by a great artist not long since passed away, and their strange outlines and still stranger colouring had haunted me ever since. I thought of them as every summer came round; I regretted them every autumn; I cherished dim hopes about them every spring. Sketching about Venice in

a gondola a year before the time of which I write, I used to be ever looking towards the faint blue peaks beyond Murano.

In short, it was an old longing; and now, high up on the mountain side, with Zermatt and the Engadine close within reach, and the multitudinous Alps extending across half the horizon, it came back upon me in such force as to make all that these great mountains and passes had to show seem tame and undesirable.

Fortunately my friend (whom I will call L. for briefness) had also read and dreamed of Dolomites, and was as eager to know more of them as myself; so we soon reached that stage in the history of every expedition when vague possibilities merge into planned certainties, and the study of maps and routes becomes the absorbing occupation of every day.

There were, of course, some difficulties to be overcome; not only those difficulties of accommodation and transit which make the Dolomite district less accessible than many more distant places, but special difficulties arising out of our immediate surroundings. There was S——, for instance (L.'s maid), who, being delicate, was less able for mountain work than ourselves. And there was the supreme difficulty of the courier—a gentleman of refined and expensive tastes, who abhorred what is generally understood by “roughing it,” despised primitive simplicity, and exacted that his employers should strictly limit their love of the picturesque to districts abundantly intersected by railways and well furnished with first-class hotels.

That this illustrious man should look with favour on our new project was obviously hopeless; so we

discussed it secretly "with bated breath," and the proceedings at once assumed the delightful character of a conspiracy. The Rev. John R., who had been acting for some weeks as English chaplain at Stresa, was in the plot from the beginning. He had himself walked through part of our Dolomite route a few years before, and so gave us just that sort of practical advice which is, of all help in travelling, the most valuable. For this; for his gallant indifference to the ultimate wrath of the courier; and for the energetic way in which (with a noble disregard of appearances, for which we can never be sufficiently grateful) he made appointments with us in secluded summer-houses, and attended stealthy indoor conferences at hours when the servants were supposed to be at meals, I here beg to offer him our sincere and hearty thanks.

All being at last fully planned, it became necessary to announce our change of route. The great man was accordingly summoned; the writer, never famous for moral courage, ignominiously retreated; and L., the dauntless, undertook the service of danger. Of that tremendous interview no details ever transpired. Enough that L. came out from it composed but victorious; and that the great man, greater than ever under defeat, comported himself thenceforth with such a nicely adjusted air of martyrdom and dignity as defies description.

Now there are three ways by which to enter the Dolomite district; namely, by Botzen, by Bruneck, or by Venice; and it fell in better with our after plans to begin from Venice. So on the morning of Thursday the 27th of June, we bade farewell to our friends on Monte Generoso, and went down in all the freshness

and beauty of the early morning. It was a day that promised well for the beginning of such a journey. There had been a heavy thunderstorm the night before, and the last cumuli were yet rolling off in a long billowy rack upon the verge of land and sky. The plains of Lombardy glittered wide and far; Milan gleamed, a marble-speck, in the mid-distance; and farthest seen of all, a faint, pure obelisk of snow, traced as it were upon the transparent air, rose Monte Viso, a hundred and twenty miles away.

But soon the rapidly descending road and thickening woods shut out the view, and in less than two hours we were down again in Mendrisio, a clean little town containing an excellent hotel, where travellers bound for the mountain, and travellers coming down to the plains, are wont to rest. Here we parted from our heavy luggage, keeping only a few small bags for use during the tour. Here also we engaged a carriage to take us on to Como, where we arrived about mid-day, after a dull and dusty drive of some two hours more.

It was our intention to push on that afternoon as far as Bellaggio, and in the morning to take the early steamer to Lecco, where we hoped to catch the 9.25 train reaching Venice at 4.30. Tired as we now were, it was pleasant to learn that the steamer would not leave till three, and that we might put up for a couple of hours at the Hotel Volta—not only the best in Como, but one of the best in Italy. Here we rested and took luncheon, and, despite the noontide blaze out of doors, contrived to get as far as that exquisite little miniature in marble, the Cathedral. Lingered there till the last moment examining the cameo-like

bas-reliefs of the façade, the strange beasts of unknown date that support the holy-water basins near the entrance, and the delicate Italian-Gothic of the nave and aisles, we only ran back just in time to see our effects being wheeled down to the pier, and to find the steamer not only crowded with passengers, but the deck piled, funnel-high, with bales of raw silk, empty baskets, and market produce of every description.

We were the only English on board, as we had been the only English in the streets, in the hotel, and apparently in all the town of Como. Our fellow-passengers were of the bourgeois class—stout matrons with fat brown hands cased in netted mittens and loaded with rings; elderly *pères de famille* in straw hats; black-eyed young women in gay shawls and fawn-coloured kid boots; and a sprinkling of priests. It had probably been market-day in Como; for the fore-deck was crowded with chattering country folk, chiefly bronzed women in wooden clogs, some few of whom wore in their plaited hair that fan-shaped head-dress of silver pins, which, though chiefly characteristic of the Canton Tessin, just over the neighbouring Swiss border, is yet worn all about the neighbourhood of the lakes.

So the boat steamed out of the little port and along the glassy lake, landing many passengers at every stage; and the fat matrons drank iced Chiavenna beer; and the priests talked together in a little knot, and made merry among themselves. There were three of them—one rubicund, jovial, and somewhat thread-bare; another very bent, and toothless, and humble, and desperately shabby; while the third, in shining broadcloth and a black satin waistcoat, carried him-

self like a gentleman and a man of the world, was liberal with the contents of his silver snuff-box, and had only to open his lips to evoke obsequious laughter. We landed the two first at small water-side hamlets by the way, and the last went ashore at Cadenabbia, in a smart boat with two rowers.

Wooded hills, vineyards, villages, terraced gardens, gleaming villas bowered in orange-groves, glided past meanwhile—a swift and beautiful panorama. The little voyage was soon over, and the sun was still high when we reached Bellaggio; a haven of delicious rest, if only for a few hours.

Next morning, however, by a quarter past seven, we were again on board and making, too slowly, for Lecco, where we arrived just in time to hear the parting whistle of the 9.25 train. Now as there were only two departures a day from this place and the next train would not start for seven hours, arriving in Venice close upon eleven at night, our case looked serious. We drove, however, to a hotel, apparently the best; and here the landlady, a bright energetic body, proposed that we should take a carriage across the country to Bergamo, and there catch up the 11.13 Express from Milan. Here was the carriage standing ready in the courtyard; here were the horses ready in the stables; here was her nephew ready to drive us—the lightest carriage, the best horses, the steadiest whip in Lecco!

Never was there so brisk a little landlady. She allowed us no time for deliberation; she helped to put the horses in with her own hands; and she packed us off as eagerly as if the prosperity of her hotel depended on getting rid of her customers as quickly

as possible. So away we went, counting the kilometres against time all the way, and triumphantly rattling up to Bergamo station just twenty minutes before the Express was due.

Then came that well-known route, so full of beauty, so rich in old romance, that the mere names of the stations along the line make Bradshaw read like a page of poetry—Brescia, Verona, Vicenza, Padua, Venice. For the traveller who has gone over all this ground at his leisure and is familiar with each place of interest as it flits by, I know no greater enjoyment than to pass them thus in rapid review, taking the journey straight through from Milan to Venice on a brilliant summer's day. What a series of impressions! What a chain of memories! What a long bright vision of ancient cities with forked battlements; white convents perched on cypress-planted hills; clustered villages, each with its slender campanile; rock-built citadels, and crumbling mediæval towns; bright rivers, and olive woods, and vineyards without end; and beyond all these a background of blue mountains ever varying in outline, ever changing in hue, as the clouds sail over them and the train flies on!

By five o'clock we were in Venice. I had not thought, when I turned southwards last autumn, that I should find myself threading its familiar water-ways so soon again. I could hardly believe that here was the Grand Canal, and yonder the Rialto, and that those white domes now coming into sight were the domes of Santa Maria della Salute. It all seemed like a dream.

And yet, somehow, it was less like a dream than

a changed reality. It was Venice; but not quite the old Venice. It was a gayer, fuller, noisier Venice; a Venice empty of English and American tourists; full to overflowing of Italians in every variety of summer finery; crowded with artists of all nations sketching in boats, or surrounded by gaping crowds in shady corners and porticos; a Venice whose flashing waters were now cloven by thousands of light skiffs with smart striped awnings of many colours, but whence the hearse-like, tufted gondola, so full of mystery and poetry, had altogether vanished; a Venice whose every side-canal swarmed with little boys learning to dive, and with swimmers of all ages; where dozens of cheap steamers (compared with which the Hungerford penny boats would seem like floating palaces) were hurrying to and fro every quarter of an hour between the Riva dei Schiavone and the bathing-places on the Lido; a Venice in which every other house in every piazza had suddenly become a café; in which brass bands were playing, and *caramels* were being hawked, and iced drinks were continually being consumed from seven in the morning till any number of hours after midnight; a Venice, in short, which was sunning itself in the brief gaiety and prosperity of the bathing season, when all Italy north of the Tiber, and a large percentage of strangers from Vienna, St. Petersburg, and the shores of the Baltic, throng thither to breathe the soft sea-breezes off the Adriatic.

We stayed three days at Danielli's, including Sunday; and, mindful that we were this time bound for a district where roads were few, villages far between, and inns scantily provided with the commonest necessities, we took care to lay in good store of portable

provision for the journey. Our Saturday and Monday were therefore spent chiefly in the mazes of the Merceria. Here we bought two convenient wicker-baskets, and wherewithal to stock them—tea, sugar, Reading biscuits in tins, chocolate in tablets, Liebig's Ramornie extract, two bottles of Cognac, four of Marsala, pepper, salt, arrowroot, a large metal flask of spirits of wine, and an Etna. Thus armed, we could at all events rely in case of need upon our own resources; and of milk, eggs, and bread we thought we might make certain everywhere. Time proved, however, that in the indulgence of even this modest hope we overestimated the fatness of the land; for it repeatedly happened that (the cows being gone to the upper pastures) we could get no milk; and on one memorable occasion, in a hamlet containing at least three or four hundred souls, that we could get no bread.

There was yet another point upon which we were severely "exercised," and that was the question of side-saddles. Mr. R., on Monte Generoso, had advised us to purchase them and take them with us, doubting whether we should find any between Cortina and Botzen. Another friend, however, had positively assured us of the existence of one at Caprile; and where there was one, we hoped there might be two more. Anyhow, we were unwilling to add the bulk and burden of three side-saddles to our luggage; so we decided to go on, and take our chance. I suspect, however, that we had no alternative, and that one might as well look for skates in Calcutta as for saddlery in Venice. As the event proved, we did ultimately succeed in capturing two side-saddles (the only two in the whole district), and in forcibly keep-

ing them throughout the journey; but this was a triumph of audacity, never to be repeated. Another time, we should undoubtedly provide ourselves with side-saddles either at Padua or Vicenza on the one side, or at Botzen on the other.

By Monday evening the 1st of July, our preparations were completed; our provision baskets packed; our stores of sketching and writing materials duly laid in; and all was at length in readiness for an early start next morning.

CHAPTER II.

VENICE TO LONGARONE.

Too Late for the Train—Venice to Conegliano—Farewell to Railways and Civilisation—We take to the Road—Ceneda—Serravalle and its Great Titian—The Gorge and Lake of Serravalle—The Bosco del Consiglio—The Lago Morto—Santa Croce—First Glimpse of the Dolomites—A Plague of Flies—Sketching under Difficulties—Capo di Ponte—The ancient Basin of the Piave—Valley of the Piave—Longarone—An Inn for a Ghost-story.

HAVING risen at grey dawn, breakfasted at a little after 5 A.M., and pulled down to the station before half the world of Venice was awake, it was certainly trying to find that we had missed our train by about five minutes, and must wait four hours for the next. Nor was it much consolation, though perhaps some little relief, to upbraid the courier who had slept too late, and so caused our misfortune. Sulky and silent, he piled our bags in a corner and kept gloomily aloof; while we, cold, dreary, and discontented, sat shivering in a draughty passage close against the ticket office, counting the weary hours and excluded even from the waiting-rooms, which were locked up "per ordine