Untrodden peaks and unfrequented valleys

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Chapter II. Venice to Longarone

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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

superiore" till half an hour before the time at which we now could proceed upon our journey. The time, however, dragged by somehow, and when at ten o'clock we at last found ourselves moving slowly out of the station, it seemed already like the middle of the day.

And now again we traversed the great bridge and the long, still, glassy space of calm lagune, and left the lessening domes of Venice far behind. And now, Mestre station being passed and the firm earth reached again, we entered on a vast flat all green with blossoming Indian corn and intersected by a network of broad dykes populous with frogs. Heavens! how they croaked! Driving out from Ravenna to Dante's famous pine-forest the other day, we had been almost deafened by them; but the shrill chorus of those Ravenna frogs was as soft music compared with the unbridled revelry of their Venetian brethren. These drowned the very noise of the train, and reduced us to dumb show till we were out of their neighbourhood.

So we sped on, the grey-blue mountains, that we had been looking at so longingly from Venice these last three days, growing gradually nearer and more definite. Soon we begin to distinguish a foreground of lower hill-tops, some dark with woods, others cultivated from base to brow and dotted over with white villages. Then by-and-by comes a point, midway as it were between Venetia and Tyrol, whence, looking back towards Conegliano, we see the last tapering Venetian campanile outlined against the horizon on the one hand, and the first bulbous Tyrolean steeple, shaped like the morion of a mediæ-

val man-at-arms, peeping above the roof of a little hill-side hamlet on the other.

The dykes and frogs are now left far behind; the line is bordered on both sides by feathery acacia hedges, and above the lower ranges of frontier mountains, certain strange jagged peaks, which, however, are not Dolomite, begin to disengage themselves from the cloudy background of the northern sky. No, they cannot be Dolomite, though they look so like it; for we have been told that we shall see no true Dolomite before to-morrow. It is possible, however, as we know, to see the Antelao from Venice on such a clear day as befalls about a dozen times in the course of a summer; but here, even if the sky were cloudless, we are too close under the lower spurs of the outlying hills to command a view of greater heights beyond.

Treviso comes next—apparently a considerable place. Here, according to Murray, is a fine Annunciation of Titian to be seen in the Duomo, but we, alas! have no time to stay for it. Here also, as our fellow-traveller, the priest in the corner, says unctuously, opening his lips for the first and last time during the journey, "they make good wine." ("Qui si fanno buon vino.")

At Treviso we drop a few third-class travellers, and (being now just eighteen miles from Venice, and exactly half-way to Conegliano) go on again through a fat, flat country; past endless fields of maize and flax; past trailing vines reared, as in the Tyrol, on low slanting trellises close against the ground; past rich midsummer meadows where sunburnt peasants wade knee-deep in wild-flowers, and their flocks of turkeys are guessed at rather than seen; past villages, and

small stations, and rambling farmhouses, and on towards the hills that are our goal. By-and-by, some four or five miles before Conegliano, the fertile plain is scarred by a broad tract of stones and sand, in the midst of which the Piave, grey, shallow, and turbid, hurries towards the sea. Of this river we are destined to see and know more hereafter, among its native Dolomites.

And now we are at Conegliano, the last point to which the railway can take us, and which, in consequence of our four hours' delay this morning, we have now no time to see. And this is disappointing; for Conegliano must undoubtedly be worth a visit. We know of old Palazzos decorated with fast-fading frescoes by Pordenone; of a theatre built by Segusini; of an altar-piece in the Duomo by Cima of Conegliano, an exquisite early painter of this place, whose works are best represented in the Brera of Milan, and whose clear, dry, polished style holds somewhat of an intermediate place between that of Giovanni Bellini and Luca Signorelli.

But if we would reach Longarone—our first stopping place—to-night, we must go on; so all we carry away is the passing remembrance of a neat little station; a bright, modern-looking town about half a mile distant; a sprinkling of white villas dotted over the neighbouring hill-sides; and a fine old castle glowering down from a warlike height beyond.

And now the guard's whistle shrills in our ears for the last time for many weeks, and the train, bound for Trieste, puffs out of the station, disappears round a curve, and leaves us on the platform with our pile of bags at our feet and all our adventures before us. We

look in each other's faces. We feel for the moment as Martin Chuzzlewit may have felt when the steamer landed him at Eden and there left him. Nothing, in truth, can be more indefinite than our prospects, more vague than our plans. We have Mayr's maps, Ball's Guide to the Eastern Alps, Gilbert and Churchill's book, and all sorts of means and appliances; but we have not the slightest idea of where we are going, or of what we shall do when we get there.

There is, however, no time now for misgivings, and in a few minutes we are again under way. Some three or four dirty post-omnibuses and bilious-looking yellow-diligences are waiting outside, bound for Belluno and Longarone; also one tolerable carriage with a pair of stout grey horses, which, after some bargaining, is engaged at the cost of a hundred lire.* For this sum the driver is to take us to-day to Longarone, and to-morrow to Cortina in the Ampezzo Valley—a distance, altogether, of something like seventy English miles. So the bags are stowed away, some inside, some outside; and presently, without entering the town at all, we drive through a dusty suburb and out again upon the open plain.

A straighter road across a flatter country it would be difficult to conceive. Bordered on each side by a row of thin poplars, and by interminable fields of Indian corn, it goes on for miles and miles, diminishing to a point in the far distance, like the well-known diagram of an avenue in perspective. And it is the peculiar attribute of this point to recede steadily in advance of us, so that we are always going on, as in a dreadful dream, and never getting any nearer. As

* About four pounds English.

for incidents by the way, there are none. We pass one of the lumbering yellow diligences that were standing erewhile at Conegliano station; we see a few brown women hoeing in the Indian corn, and then for miles we neither pass a house nor meet a human being.

It appears to me that hours must have gone by thus when I suddenly wake up, baked by the sun and choked by the dust, to find the whole party asleep, driver included, and the long distant hills now rising close before us. Seeing a little town not a quarter of a mile ahead—a little town bright in sunshine against a background of dark woods, with a ruined castle on a height near by, I know at once that this must be Ceneda — the Ceneda that Titian loved — and that yonder woods and hills and ruined castle are the same he took for the landscape background to his St. Peter Martyr. Here he is said to have owned property in land; and at Manza, four miles off, he built himself a summer villa.

Now, moved by some mysterious instinct, the driver wakes up just in time to crack his whip, put his horses into a gallop, and clatter, as foreign vetturini love to clatter, through the one street which is the town. But in vain; for Ceneda—silent, solitary, basking in the sun, with every shutter closed and only a lean dog or two loitering aimlessly about the open space in front of the church—is apparently as sound asleep as an enchanted town in a fairy tale. Not a curtain is put aside, not a face peers out upon us as we rattle past. The very magpie in his wicker cage outside the barber's shop is dozing on his perch, and scarcely opens an eye, though we make noise enough to rouse the Seven Sleepers.

Once past the houses, we fall back, of course, into the old pace, the gracious hills drawing nearer and unfolding fresh details at every step. And now at last green slopes and purple crags close round our path; the road begins to rise; a steep and narrow gorge, apparently a mere cleft in the mountains like the gorge of Pfeffers, opens suddenly before us; and from the midst of a nest of vines, mulberry trees and chestnuts, the brown roofs and campaniles of Serravalle lift themselves into sight.

Serravalle, though it figures on the map in smaller type than Ceneda which is, or was, an Episcopal residence, is yet a much more considerable place, covering several acres, and straggling up into the mouth of the gorge through which the Meschio comes hurrying to the plain. Strictly speaking, perhaps, there is now no Ceneda and no Serravalle, the two townships having been united of late by the Italian Government under the name of Vittoria; but they lie a full mile apart, and no one seems as yet to take kindly to the new order of things.

Again our driver cracks his whip and urges his horses to a canter; and so, with due magnificence, we clatter into the town—a quaint, picturesque, crumbling, world-forgotten place, with old stone houses abutting on the torrent; and a Duomo that looks as if it had been left unfinished three hundred years ago; and gloomy arcades vaulting the footways on each side of the principal street, as in Strasburg and Berne. Dashing across the bridge and into the Piazza, we pull up before one of the two inns which there compete for possession of the infrequent traveller; for Serravalle boasts not only a Piazza and a Duomo, but

two Alberghi, two shabby little cafés, a Regia Posta, and even a lottery office with "Qui si giuocono per Venezia" painted in red letters across the window.

Here, too, the inhabitants are awake and stirring. They play at dominos in their shirt-sleeves outside the cafés. They play at "morra" in the shade of doorways and arcades. They fill water-jars, wash lettuces, and gossip at the fountain. They even patronise the drama, as may be seen by the erection of a temporary puppet-theatre ("patronised by His Majesty the King of Italy and all the Sovereigns of Europe") on a slope of waste ground close against the church. Nor is wanting the usual score or two of idle men and boys who immediately start up from nowhere in particular, and swarm, open-mouthed, about the carriage, staring at its occupants as if they were members of a travelling menagerie.

But Serravalle has something better than puppets and an idle population to show. The Duomo contains a large painting of the Madonna and Child in glory, by Titian, executed to order some time between the years 1542 and 1547—a grand picture belonging to what may perhaps be called the second order of the master's greatest period, and of which it has lately been said by an eminent traveller and critic that "it would alone repay a visit to Serravalle, even from Venice." With respect to the treatment of this fine work, Mr. Gilbert, whose admirable book on Titian and Cadore leaves nothing for any subsequent writer to add on these subjects, says:—"It is one of the grandest specimens of the master, and in very fair preservation. It represents the Virgin and Child in glory surrounded by angels, who fade into the golden

haze above. Heavy-volumed clouds support and separate from earth this celestial vision; and below, standing on each side, are the colossal and majestic figures of St. Andrew and St. Peter; the former supporting a massive cross, the latter holding aloft, as if challenging denial of his faithfulness, the awful keys. Between these two noble figures, under a low horizon line, is a dark lake amidst darker hills, where a distant sail recalls the fisherman and his craft. Composition, drawing, colour, are all dignified and worthy of the master." *Cadore*, p. 43.

And now, time pressing, the day advancing, and three fourths of the drive yet lying before us, we must push on, or Longarone will not be reached ere nightfall. So, having been sufficiently stared at—not only by the population generally, but by the landlord and landlady and everybody connected with the inn, as well as by the domino players, who leave their games to take part in the entertainment—we clatter off again and make straight for the rocky mouth of the gorge, now closing in upon, and apparently swallowing up, the long line of old stone houses creeping into the defile. Some of these, shattered and decaying as they are, show traces of Venetian-Gothic in pointed ogive window and delicate twisted column. They belonged, no doubt, to wealthy owners in the days when Titian used to ride over from Manza to visit his married daughter who lived at Serravalle.

Where the houses end, the precipices so close in that there is but just space for the road and the torrent. Then the gorge gradually widens through wooded slopes and hanging chestnut groves; farm-houses and châlets perched high on grassy plateaus

begin to look more Swiss than Italian; mountains and forests all round shut in the view; and about two miles from Serravalle the Meschio expands into a tiny, green, transparent lake, tranquil as a cloudless evening sky, and fringed by a broad border of young flax. A single skiff, reflected upside down as in a mirror, floats idly in the middle of the lake. The fisherman in it seems to be asleep. Not a ripple, not a breath, disturbs the placid picture in the water. Every hill and tree is there, reversed; and every reed is doubled.

This delicious pool, generally omitted in the maps, is the Lago di Serravalle. Woods slope down to the brink on one side, and the road, skirting the débris of an old landslip, winds round the other. Two tiny white houses with green jalousies and open Italian balconies at the head of the lake, a toy church on a grassy knoll, and a square mediæval watchtower clinging to a ridge of rock above, make up the details of a picture so serene and perfect that even Turner at his sunniest period could scarcely have idealized it.

The gorge now goes on widening and becomes a valley, once the scene of a bergfall so gigantic that it is supposed to have turned the course of the Piave (flowing out till then by Serravalle) and to have sent it thenceforward and for ever through the Val di Mel. This catastrophe happened ages ago—most probably in pre-historic times; yet the great barrier, six hundred feet in height from this side, looks as if it might be less than a century old. Few shrubs have taken root in these vast hillocks of slaty débris, among and over which the road rises continually; few mosses have

gathered in the crannies of these monster blocks which lie piled like fallen towers by the wayside. All is bare, ghastly, desolate.

As we mount higher, the outlying trees of a great beech-forest on the verge of a lofty plateau to the right, are pointed out by the driver as the famous Bosco del Consiglio—a name that dates back to old Venetian rule, when these woods furnished timber to the state. Hence came the wood of which the "Bucentaur" was built; and—who knows?—perhaps the merchant ships of Antonio and the war-galley in which "blind old Dandolo" put forth against the Turk.

Presently, being now about four miles from Serravalle, and the top of the great bergfall not yet reached, we come upon another little green, clear lake, about the size of the last—the Lago Morto. It lies down in a hollow below the road, close under a huge, sheer precipice blinding white in the sunshine, whence half the mountain side looks as if it had been sliced away at a blow. If it were not that the débris could hardly be piled up where and how it is, leaving that hollow in which the lake lies sleeping, one would suppose this to be the spot whence the rock-slip came what time it barred out the Piave from the gorge of Serravalle.

According to the local legend, no boat can live upon those tranquil waters, and no bather who plunges into them may ever swim back to shore. Both are, in some terrible way, drawn down and engulphed "deeper than did ever plummet sound." It is said, however, that the last Austrian Governor of Lombardo-Venetia, being anxious to put an end to this superstí-

tion, brought up a boat from the Santa Croce side, and, in the presence of a breathless crowd from all the neighbouring villages, himself rowed the pretty wife of the Fadalto postmaster across the lake, and landed her triumphantly upon the opposite shore. Your Tyrolean peasant, however, is not easily disabused of ancient errors, and the Lago Morto, I am told, notwithstanding that public rehabilitation, enjoys its evil reputation to this day.

At length, having the Bosco del Consiglio always to the right, and the Col Vicentino with its scattered snow drifts towering to the left, we gain the summit of the ridge and see the lake of Santa Croce, looking wonderfully like the lake of Albano, lying close beneath our feet. Great mountains, all grey and purple crags above, all green corn-fields and wooded slopes below, enclose it in a nest of verdure. The village and church of Santa Croce, perched on a little grassy bluff, almost overhang the water. Other villages and campaniles sparkle far off on shore and hillside; while yonder, through a gap in the mountains at the farther end of the lake, we are startled by a strange apparition of pale fantastic peaks lifted high against the northern horizon.

"Ecco!" says the driver, pointing towards them with his whip, and half turning round to watch the effect of his words, "Ecco i nostri Dolomiti!"

The announcement is so unexpected that for the first moment it almost takes one's breath away. Having been positively told that no Dolomites would come into sight before the second day's journey, we have neither been looking for them nor expecting them—and yet there they are, so unfamiliar, and yet

so unmistakeable! One feels immediately that they are unlike all other mountains, and yet that they are exactly what one expected them to be.

"Che Dolomiti sono? Come si chiamano?" (What Dolomites are they? What are their names?) are the eager questions that follow.

But the bare geological fact is all our driver has to tell. They are Dolomites—Dolomites on the Italian side of the frontier. He knows no more; so we can only turn to our maps, and guess, by comparison of distances and positions, that those clustered *aiguilles* belong most probably to the range of Monte Sfornioi.

At Santa Croce we halt for half an hour before the door of an extremely dirty little Albergo, across the front of which is painted in conspicuous letters, "Qui si vende buon vino a chi vuole."

Leaving the driver and courier to test the truth of this legend, we order coffee and drink it in the open air. The horses are taken out and fed. The writer, grievously tormented by a plague of flies, makes a sketch under circumstances of untold difficulty, being presently surrounded by the whole population of the place, among whom are some three or four handsome young women with gay red and yellow handkerchiefs bound round their heads like turbans. These damsels are by no means shy. They crowd; they push; they chatter; they giggle. One invites me to take her portrait. Another wishes to know if I am married. A third discovers that I am like a certain Maria Rosa whom they all seem to know; whereupon every feature of my face is discussed separately, and for the most part to my disparagement.

At this trying juncture, L., in a moment of happy

inspiration, offers to show them the chromo-lithographs in Gilbert and Churchill's book, and so creates a diversion in my favour. Meanwhile the flies settle upon me in clouds, walk over my sky, drown themselves in the water bottles, and leave their legs in the brown madder; despite all which impediments, however, I achieve my sketch, and by the time the horses are put to, am ready to go on again.

The road now skirts the lake of Santa Croce, at the head of which extends an emerald-green flat wooded with light, feathery, yellowish poplars — evidently at one time part of the bed of the lake, from which the waters have long since retreated. From this point, we follow the line of the valley, passing the smart new village of Cadola; and at Capo di Ponte, whence the valley of Serravalle and the Val di Mel diverge at right angles, come again upon the Piave, now winding in and out among stony hillocks, like the Rhone at Leuk, and milk-white from its glacier-source in the upper Dolomites. The old bridge at Capo di Ponte—the old bridge which dated from Venetian times—is now gone; and with it the buttresses adorned with the lion of St. Mark mentioned by Ball and alluded to in Mr. Gilbert's "Cadore." Fragments of the ancient piers may yet be traced; but a new and very slight-looking iron bridge now spans the stream some fifty yards higher up. At Capo di Ponte, the most unscientific observer cannot fail to see that the Piave must once upon a time (most probably when the great bergfall drove its waters back from Serravalle) have here formed another lake, the great natural basin of which yet remains, with the river flowing through it in a low secondary channel.

And now the road enters another straight and narrow valley—the valley of the Piave—closed in far ahead by a rugged Dolomite, all teeth and needle-points. By this time the long day is drawing to a close. Cows after milking are being driven back to pasture; labourers are plodding homewards; and a party of country girls with red handkerchiefs upon their heads, wading knee-deep through the wild-flowers of a wayside meadow, look like a procession of animated poppies. Then the sun goes down; the sky and the mountains turn cold and grey; and just before the dusk sets in we arrive at Longarone.

A large rambling village with a showy Renaissance church and a few shabby shops — a big desolate inn with stone staircases and stone floors — a sullen landlord—a frightened, bare-footed chambermaid who looks as if she had just been caught wild in the mountains —bedrooms like barns, floors without carpets, windows without curtains — such are our first comfortless impressions of Longarone. Nor are these impressions in any wise modified by more intimate acquaintance. We dine in a desert of sitting-room at an oasis of table, lighted by a single tallow candle. The food is indifferent and indifferently cooked. The wine is the worst we have had in Italy.

Meanwhile, a stern and ominous look of satisfaction settles on the countenance of the great man whom we have so ruthlessly torn from the sphere he habitually adorns. "I told you so" is written in every line of his face, and in the very bristle of his moustache. At last, being dismissed for the night and told at what hour to have the carriage round in the morning, he can keep silence no longer.

"We shall not meet with many inns so good as this, where we are going," he says, grimly triumphant. "Good night, ladies!" — and with this parting shot, retires.

My bedroom that night measures about thirty-five feet in length by twenty-five in breadth, and is enlivened by five windows and four doors. The windows look out variously upon street, courtyard, and stables. The doors lead to endless suites of empty, shut-up rooms, and all sorts of intricate passages. 'Tis as ghostly, echoing, suicidal a place to sleep in as ever I saw in my life!

CHAPTER III.

LONGARONE TO CORTINA.

The Pic Gallina—A communicative Priest—The Timber Trade—The smallest Church in Italy—Castel Lavazzo—Perarolo—A Vision of the Antelao—The Zigzag of Monte Zucco—Tai Cadore—One of the finest Drives in Europe—The Glories of the Ampezzo Thal—The Pelmo—The Rochetta—The Landslip of 1816—The Antelao—The Croda Malcora—Sorapis—We cross the Austrian Frontier—The Bec di Mezzodi—The Tofana—Monte Cristallo—Cortina—Arrival at Ghedina's Inn—"Il Tuckett's" Name proves a Word of Might—A thorough Tyrolean Hostelry—Preparations for the *Sagro*.

LONGARONE, seen at six o'clock on a grey, dull morning, looked no more attractive than at dusk the evening before. There had been thunder and heavy rain in the night, and now the road and footways were full of muddy pools. The writer, however, was up betimes, wandering alone through the wet streets; peeping into the tawdry churches; spelling over the framed and glazed announcements of births, deaths, and marriages at the Prefettura; sketching the Pic Gallina, a solitary conspicuous peak over against the