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Untrodden peaks and unfrequented valleys

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Leipzig, 1873

Chapter VIII. At Caprile

came up, bringing with them rain and heavy thunder; whereupon the ringers got up and rang the church bells all night long while the storm lasted.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT CAPRILE.

Unsettled Weather—Processions and Bells—Resources of Caprile—History of Caprile in the Middle Ages—The free State of Rocca—Local Notabilities—The Gorge of Sottoguda—The Sasso di Ronch—Clementi and the two Nessols—The Goatherd's Cross—The King and Queen of the Dolomites—A Mountain in Ruins—The Sasso Bianco—A tempting Proposal—Legends of the Sasso di Ronch.

THE good people of Caprile were difficult to please in the matter of weather. The bells having rung all night, the population turned out next morning in solemn procession at five A.M. to implore the Virgin's protection against storms. The clouds cleared off accordingly, and a magnificent morning followed the tempest. At midday, however, the procession formed again, and with more ceremony than before—a tall barefooted contadino in a tumbled surplice coming first, with a huge wooden crucifix; then a shabby priest with his hat on, intoning a litany; then two very small and very dirty boys in red capes, carrying unlighted lanthorns on poles; lastly, a long file of country folks marching two and two, the men first, the women next, the children last, all with their hats in their hands and all chanting. In this order they wound slowly round the village, beginning at the Contrada di San Marco.

"What is the procession for now?" I asked, turning to a respectable-looking peasant who was washing down a cart under an archway.

"They are going up to the church to pray for rain,

Signora," he replied, pulling off his hat as the procession went by.

"But it rained last night," said I, "and this morning you were all praying for fine weather."

"Nay, Signora; we prayed this morning against the thunder and lightning—not against the rain," said my peasant gravely.

"Oh, I see—you want the rain, but you prefer it without the thunder."

"Yes, Signora. We want the rain badly. We have been praying against the drought these ten days past."

"But it seems to me," said I, "that you would waste less time if, instead of praying against the thunder, and the lightning, and the drought, you just asked the Madonna to put the wind round to the South-west and send forty-eight hours of steady rain immediately."

The man looked puzzled.

"It may be so, Signora," he said apologetically. "The Paroco settles all that for us—he knows best."

The poor fellow looked so humble and so serious that I turned away, quite ashamed of my own levity.

After this we had unsettled weather for several days, during which it was invariably fine in the mornings and tempestuous towards night. This being the case, the procession came round quite regularly twice a day, to protest against the storm or the sunshine according as the skies were foul or fair.

Meanwhile the bell-ringers must have had a hard time of it, for—much to our discomfort, though greatly to the satisfaction of the people of Caprile—the bells were going almost every night. The poor, I found,

believed that this pious exercise dispersed the evil spirits of the storm; while the better sort conceived that it occasioned some kind of undulation in the air, and so broke the continuity of the electric fluid. Who would have expected to find these exploded superstitions* yet in force in any corner of Europe? It was like being transported back into the middle ages.

To be condemned to a few days of uncertain weather at Caprile is by no means the worst fate that may befall a traveller in these parts. The place is full of delightful walks, all near enough to be enjoyed between the last shower and the next; of woods, and glens, and pastures rich in wild flowers; of easy hills for those who love climbing; of shade for the student; of trout for the angler; of ferns for the botanist. In a lovely little ravine among over-hanging firs and mossy nooks of rock, not a quarter of a mile from the village, L. found specimens of the *Cystopteris fragilis*, *Cystopteris alpina*, *Asplenium septentrionale*, and several varieties of maiden hair. And for the matter of sketching, a subject starts up before one at every turn of the path.

Nor does one, as in too many Dolomite villages and valleys, pay the penalty of starvation in exchange for all these pleasures. The food is very fairly good, and Madame Pezzé's cooking unexceptionable. Beef,

* "It is sayd the evil spirytes that ben in the regyon of thayre doute moche whan they here the belles rongen: and this is the cause why the belles ben rongen whan it thondreth, and whan grete tempeste and outrages of wether happen, to the ende that the feinds and wycked spirytes sholde be abashed and flee, and cease of the movyng of tempeste."—WYNKEN DE WORDE: *The Golden Legend*.

See also the old Monkish rhyme inscribhed on most mediæval bells :—

Funera plango—Fulgura frango—Sabbato pango.
Excito lentos—Dissipo ventos—Paco cruentos.

even though disguised in cinnamon, is welcome after a long and fatiguing course of veal-cutlet; the salmon-trout of Alleghe is excellent; the bread, the wild strawberries, the rich mountain cream are all quite delicious; and even vegetables are not wholly unknown.

Then, besides the walks and the ferns and the sketching, Caprile—like almost every Italian place—has its special characteristics; its local curiosities; its own little root of mediæval history; and these are things that do not come out unless one happens to be idling about for a few days, talking to the people, making friends with the Paroco, and borrowing all the dusty old vellum-bound books in the place. In this way we light upon a few odd scraps of fact, more interesting to pick up, perhaps, than to relate.

Thus we learn that there were great iron-mines once at the Col di Santa Lucia; that both Alleghe and Caprile were famous for their skilled ironsmiths and armourers; and that they used to supply knives and swords to Venice. That exquisite old bronze door-handle wrought in the form of a mermaid, and that twisted hammer beaten out of one solid piece which I admired so much yesterday on the door of yonder dilapidated stone house at the farther end of the village, came probably from some anvil now buried at the bottom of the lake. There were forty mines once, they say, in the province of Belluno, where now only four are in operation. The old name of Caprile was Pagus Gabrielis. I could not learn that any inscriptions, urns, or mosaics had ever been found here, as at Longarone and Castel Lavazzo; so that the ancient Latin name seems to be the only Roman relic left. Towards the middle of the XV. century, the men

of Caprile and Cadore united their political fortunes and placed themselves under the protection of Venice; whereupon the Republic appointed them a governor with the title of Captain General. It was one of these Captains who erected the column of St. Mark yonder, at the extreme end of the village. At this time Caprile was a flourishing commercial centre, and the chief commune in these valleys.

Among the natural curiosities of the place, they point you out a small hole in the face of a neighbouring rock, and tell you it is the mouth of a spring impregnated with sulphuretted hydrogen, once worked to some profit, but now abandoned. We also heard of the recent discovery of a vein of fine alabaster at a place called Digonera, a little farther up the valley, said to equal in quality the best alabaster of Tuscany.

Then, too, there is the dialect, unaccountably smacking of French in a country locked in between Venetia and Austria. Almost every little separate "paese" in these parts has its own vocabulary; and an enthusiast like Professor Max Müller might doubtless, by means of a comparative analysis of these hundred-and-one dialectic varieties, extract all kinds of interesting philological flies in amber.

More curious, however, than any fact having to do with Caprile is the history of Rocca—a small village perched upon a hill just against the mouth of the Val Pettorina and fronting the precipitous northern face of Monte Pezza. This tiny place, known in the middle ages as Rocca di Pietore, or Roccabruna, if never in the strict sense of the word a Republic, was at all events self-governed; owing only a nominal allegiance to the Archdeacon of Capo d'Istria, and enjoying a

special immunity from tax, impost, or personal service ("imposta o colta o fazioni personali"). This interesting little community, consisting of forty-five families, the men of which were nearly all armourers, was constrained in A.D. 1389 to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Visconti, who placed it under the jurisdiction of the Bellunese. Not even so, however, would Rocca resign its cherished liberties, but stipulated that all the articles of its ancient statute should be observed inviolate. The MS. original of this remarkable document, drawn out in sixty-six clauses and registered at Belluno in the year 1418, is now in the possession of Signora Pezzé of Caprile. When by and by the Visconti attempted to levy a tax upon their steel-work, the men of Rocca rebelled; and later still, in A.D. 1659, being then subject to the Venetians and jealous as ever of their privileges, they despatched an ambassador to the Senate, reminding that august body how, "being situated on the frontier and exposed to the attacks of enemies beyond the border, the people of Rocca had at all times testified to their patriotism with their blood, and preserved intact those privileges which were dearer to them than the pupils of their eyes."*

In all but name a republic, this little free state, smaller than either Marino or Andorre, finally lost its independence when ceded to the Austrians with

* This spirited address, a copy of which is preserved in the archives of Belluno, begins thus:—"Serenissimo Principe. La Rocca di Pietore, situata né monti più aspri e confinante con paesi esteri, in tutti i tempi esposta all' invasione dei nemici, con caratteri di Sangue ha dati segni infallibile della sua fede, e dimostrato che gli abitanti di quella, quanto più semplice e poveri di beni di fortuna, tanto più sonodotati di ardenza e prontezza a sacrificare sè stessi in servizio del principe loro; da che è sortito che sempre dalla Serenità Vostra sono stati con clementissimo occhio riguardati conservandoli in tutti i tempi illesi ed intalli quei privilegi che gli sono più delle pupille degli occhi cari," &c. &c.

the rest of Lombardo-Venetia in 1814. It now ranks as an ordinary parish in the district of Belluno; its castle has disappeared; and only four roofless walls of rough masonry in a green meadow at the foot of the hill on the side next Caprile, remain to mark the site of its former Municipal Palace. It is an ugly, gable-ended ruin, and looks like the shell of a small church.

In the way of local notabilities, Rocca has its painter, one Domenico de Biasio, whose works are supposed to have merit; while Caprile rejoices in a certain Padre Barnabas of the Capuchin order, famous for the eloquence of his sermons, which have been published in Belluno. Having neither seen the paintings nor read the sermons, I am unable to pronounce upon the excellence of either.

The two really remarkable natural curiosities of the place, however, are the gorge of Sottoguda and the Sasso di Ronch. Every visitor to Caprile is shown the first: we, I believe, were the first travellers who ever took the trouble to go up in search of the second.

The gorge of Sottoguda—a deep, narrow cleft between overhanging cliffs, distant about four-and-a-half, or five miles from Caprile—is in fact the upper end of the Val Pettorina, which here creeps between the lower spurs of Monte Guda and the Monte Foy. It is neither so narrow, nor so dark, nor so deep down as Pfeffers or Trient; but it reminds one of both, and, though on a smaller scale, is very fine and curious in its way. That the whole gorge is a mere crack in the rocks produced by some pre-historic natural convulsion, is evident at first sight. I even fancied that I could see how in certain places the rent cliffs might

have been fitted together again, like the pieces of a child's puzzle.

The length of the gorge, which wriggles in and out like a serpent, is rather more than half-a-mile, windings included. Within this short distance, the torrent that flows through it is crossed by seventeen bridges of rough pine trunks. So abrupt are the turns and sinuosities, that never more than two of these bridges are visible at the same time, and sometimes the traveller who is only one bridge in advance is entirely lost sight of by his companions. The torrent roars along in great force, and is echoed and re-echoed in a deafening way from the cliffs on either side. The gorge is in many places not more than twelve feet wide. The precipices, at a rough guess, rise to a height of about six or seven hundred feet. The scale, after all, is not gigantic; but the light and shadow come in grandly at certain hours, throwing one side of the defile into brilliant sunshine and the other into profoundest gloom, with an effect never to be obtained in either Pfeffers or Trient.

We first saw Sottoguda on a showery afternoon when the lights were unusually shifting and beautiful, and all the trees and bushes overhead, and all the rich red and brown and golden mosses on the rocks and boulders down below, were sparkling with rain drops. A woman standing on a slender bridge formed of a single pine-trunk thrown across a rift of rock some three hundred feet above our heads, looked down, knitting, as we wound in and out among the bridges and rapids. She smiled and spoke; but the roar of the water was such that we could not hear her. We saw the motion of her lips, and that was all.

Presently a little white goat came and thrust its head forward from behind her skirts, and also peered down upon the wayfarers below. The blue sky and the green bushes framed them round, and made a picture not soon to be forgotten.

Most travellers see Sottoguda from Caprile; but it is approached to more advantage from the side of the Fedaya pass, and should, if possible, be first taken from that direction. Those, however, who are not equal to the fatigue of crossing the pass, may go to Sottoguda and back from Caprile in about three hours with mules, or four hours on foot.

To go to the Sasso di Ronch, however, takes quite half a day. It is a very curious spot, and one of which the writer may claim to be in a very small way the discoverer.

Wandering about as usual before breakfast the first morning after our arrival in Caprile, and taking the road towards Alleghe, I observed a strange, solitary chimney of rock standing out against the sky, high upon the sloping shoulder of Monte Migion, about two thousand feet above the level of the valley. Seen from below, it had apparently no thickness proportionate to its height and breadth, and looked like a gigantic paper-knife stuck upright in a bed of green sward. A few trees and a couple of châteaux nestled at the foot of this eccentric object; and, scaling it by these, I concluded that it could not measure less than 250 feet from base to summit. I had come out that morning to see the Civita; but, having taken a long look at that Queen of Dolomites, I nevertheless sat down there and then upon a big boulder in a flood

of burning sunshine, and, with the help of an opera-glass, sketched the Sasso di Ronch.

From that moment I was tormented by the desire to see it more nearly. There were houses up there, so it was fair to conclude there must also be a path; and of the view it must command in at least two directions, there could be no doubt. Giuseppe, however, knew nothing about it; and none of the Pezzés had ever taken the trouble to go higher than Rocca, or Lasté, or the cross on the brink of the cliff about halfway between the two, where strangers are taken to see the view over the Civita.

"There is nothing up yonder," said young Signora Pezzé, contemptuously; "nothing but an old stone and a couple of poor cottages!"

But the old stone had fascinated our imaginations; so one fine morning we sent for Clementi and the mules, and started upon our voyage of discovery.

Clementi must be introduced—Clementi and the mules. Clementi is our Caprile guide. He either belongs to the mules or the mules belong to him; it is impossible to say which. One mule is black, the other white, and both are named Nessel; which is perplexing. Fair Nessel is L.'s mule—a gentle beast, weak but willing; given to stopping and staring at the landscape in a meditative way; but liable to odd and sometimes inconvenient prejudices. Yesterday he objected to bridges, which in the gorge of Sottoguda was particularly awkward. To-day he suddenly abhors everything black, and kicks up his heels at the curé before we are out of the village. Dark Nessel, being bigger and stronger, is assigned to me. He is a self-sufficient brute, one who, in the matter of roads and

turnings, invariably prefers his own opinion to that of his rider. His appetite is boundless, omnivorous, insatiable. He not only steals the young corn by the road-side and the flowers inside garden fences, but he eats poison-berries, chicken-bones, bark, egg-shells and potato-parings. He would eat the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, if it came in his way. L. and her mule are the best friends in the world. She feeds him perpetually with sugar, and he follows her about like a dog. My mule and I, on the contrary, never arrive at terms of intimacy. Perhaps he knows that I am the heavier weight, and resents me accordingly; perhaps he dislikes the society of ladies, and prefers carrying half-ton loads of hay and charcoal, which is the sort of thing he has been brought up to do. At all events, he refuses from the first to make himself agreeable. Both mules, however, do their work wonderfully, and climb like cats upon occasion.

Clementi is a native of Caprile, and lodges with his old mother on the ground-floor of a big stone house in the middle of the village. He is a short, active, sturdy, black-eyed little fellow; hot-tempered, ready-witted, merry, untiring, full of animation and gesture; with an honest bull-dog face, and an eye that is always laughing. He wears his trowsers tucked up round the ankles; a bunch of cock's feathers in his hat; and a bottle slung over his shoulder. It is impossible to look at him without being reminded of the clown in a Christmas pantomime. Such is Clementi; the very antipodes of Giuseppe, whom I described long since. With these two men and these two mules, we travelled henceforth as long as we remained among the Dolomites.

Setting off that bright July morning for the Sasso di Ronch, our way lies at first in the direction of Rocca. The path, however, turns aside at the ruins of the old Municipal Palace and bears away to the right, striking up at once through the fir-woods which on this side clothe the lower slopes of Monte Migion. Thus, in alternate shade and sunshine, it winds and mounts as far as the cross—a point of view on the giddy edge of an abrupt precipice facing to the South. The cliff here goes sheer down to the valley, a thousand feet or more; and Clementi tells how the cross was put there, not to mark the point of view for “Messieurs les Étrangers;” but to commemorate the death of a poor little goat-herd only eleven years of age, who, going in search of a stray kid, fell over, and was dashed to pieces before he reached the bottom.

The view from here is fine, considering at what a moderate elevation we stand. The Civita rises before us, grandly displayed; five valleys open away beneath our feet; and the slated roofs of Caprile and Rocca glisten in the morning sunshine hundreds of feet below. A greenish-blue corner of the lake gleams just beyond the last curve of the Val d’Alleghe; while between that point and this, there extend, distance beyond distance, the fir-woods, the pastures, and the young corn-slopes of Monte Pezza.

From hence, a better path winds round towards the North-east in the direction of Lasté—a small white village on a mountain ledge high above the valley, looking straight over towards Buchenstein. From here the grey old castle on its pedestal of crag, the green valley of Andraz, and the mountains of the Tre Sassi Pass are all visible; but the main feature of the view

on this side is the Pelmo—just as the main feature of the view on the other side is the Civita. Seen through a gap in the mountains, it rises magnificently against the horizon, looking more than ever like a gigantic fortress. I have called the Civita, Queen of the Dolomites; and so, in like manner, I would call the Pelmo, King. The one is all grace and symmetry; the other all massiveness and strength. It is possible to associate the idea of fragility with the Civita—it is possible to conceive how that exquisite perpendicular screen with its thousands of slender pilasters and pinnacles, might be shivered by any great convulsion of Nature; but the Pelmo looks as if rooted in the heart of “the great globe itself,” immoveable, till the day of the last disruption.

For a distant view, this of the Pelmo from near Lasté on Monte Migion, is the grandest with which I am acquainted.

From this point we next struck up across a green slope wooded like an English park, and so came out upon another path, steep and stony and glaring, which led to the cottages that I had seen from the valley.

A woman scouring a brass pan at the spring, and two others turning the yellow flax upon the hillside, stopped in their work to stare in speechless wonder. The children shouted and ran indoors, as if we were goblins.

We stayed a moment at the spring to fill our water flasks and let the mules drink.

“Have you never seen any ladies up here before?” laughed Clementi.

“Never!” said one of the women, throwing up her

hands emphatically. "Never! What have they come for?"

We explained that our object was to see and sketch the Sasso up yonder.

"Il Sasso!" she repeated, half incredulously; "il Sasso!"

She evidently thought us quite demented.

Another bit of rough path, another turn, and the great paper-knife rock, like a huge, solitary Menhir, is nodding over our heads.

It looks even bigger than I had expected—bigger and thinner; but also more shapeless and less interesting. It is a marvel that the first high wind should not blow it down instantly; but then it had this effect from below.

"Don't you think we have taken a great deal of trouble for nothing?" says L., in a tone of disappointment.

I would not acknowledge it for worlds, but I have been thinking so myself for some minutes. I push on, however, turn another corner, and arriving at the top of the Col, come suddenly upon a most unexpected and fantastic scene—a scene as of a mountain in ruins.

For not only is the whole appearance of the Sasso changed in the strangest way by being seen in profile, but behind the ridge on which the Sasso stands there is revealed a vast circular amphitheatre, like the crater of an extinct volcano, strewn with rent crags, precipices riven from top to bottom, and enormous fragments of rock, many of which are at least as big as the clock-tower at Westminster. All these are piled

one upon another in the wildest confusion; all are prostrate, save one gigantic needle which stands upright in the midst of the circle, like an iceberg turned to stone.

What was the nature of this great catastrophe, and when did it happen? It could not have been a berg-fall; for the mountain slopes above are all grassy Alp, and the very summit of Monte Migion is a space of level pasture. It could not have been an eruption; for these fragments are pure Dolomite limestone, and Dolomite, it is now agreed, is not volcanic. Unable even to form a guess as to the cause of this great ruin, I can only say that, to my unscientific eyes, it looks exactly as if a volcano had burst up beneath a Dolomite summit and blown it into a thousand fragments, like a mine.

Meanwhile here, on the ridge, apart and alone, like a solitary remnant of outer battlement left standing beside a razed fortress, rises to a height of at least 250 feet above the grass at its base, the Sasso di Ronch. Seen thus in profile, it is difficult to believe that it is the same Sasso di Ronch which one has been looking at from below. It looks like a mere aiguille, or spire, disproportionately slender for its height, and curved at the top, as if just ready to pitch over. Someone has compared the Matterhorn to the head and neck of a war-horse rearing up behind the valley of Zermatt; so might the Sasso di Ronch from this point be compared to the head and neck of a giraffe. Standing upon its knife-edge of ridge—all precipice below, all sky above, the horizon one long sweep of jagged peaks—it makes as wild and weird a subject as ever I sat down to sketch before or since!

Thus the morning passes. At noon, we rest in the shade of the Sasso to eat our frugal luncheon of bread and hard-boiled eggs; then, being refreshed, pack up the sketching traps and prepare to go home. It is not long, however, before we call another halt—this time in the midst of a beautiful open glade a little way below the cottages. Here—framed in by a foreground of velvet turf, a *châlet* and a group of larches, and only divided from us by the misty abyss of the Val Pettorina—rise the vertical cliffs and craggy summits of Monte Pezza. It is a ready-made sketch, and must be seized on the spot.

"There ought to be a fine view from that point yonder," I remark, mixing a pale little pool of cobalt, like a solution of turquoises, and addressing myself to no one in particular.

Hereupon Clementi, *à propos*, as it would seem, of nothing, says briskly:—

"Would the Signoras like to make a first ascent?"

"A first ascent," I repeat vaguely, adding a softening drop of brown madder, and so turning the whole pool into a tender pearly grey. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, would the Signoras like to be the first to mount to the top of the Sasso Bianco?"

"The Sasso Bianco!" says L., beginning to be interested in the conversation. "Where is the Sasso Bianco?"

Clementi points to my sketch, and then to the mountain opposite.

"But that is the Monte Pezza!" I exclaim.

"Scusate, Signora—the Sasso Bianco is the summit of the Monte Pezza. No traveller has ever been up there. It is new—new—new!"

"How can it be new?" I ask, incredulously. "It is not a very high mountain."

"Scusate ancora, Signora—it is not a mountain of the first class; but it is high, very high, for a mountain of the second class. It is higher than either the Frisolet, the Fernazza, or the Migion."

"Still it is much less difficult than the Civita, and the Civita has been ascended several times. How then should the Sasso Bianco have escaped till now?"

"Because, Signora, the Sasso Bianco is too difficult for ordinary travellers, and not difficult enough for the Club Alpino," replies Clementi, oracularly. "Il Ball, il Tuckett, il Whitwell care nothing for a mountain which they can swallow at one mouthful."

This sounds logical. I begin to look at my mountain with more respect, and to take extra pains with my sketch. At the same time, I venture to remind Clementi that L. and I are only "ordinary travellers" and, as such, might find the Sasso Bianco too tough to be swallowed in even many mouthfuls. But he will not listen to this view of the question for a moment. If we choose to do it, we have but to say so. He will undertake that the Signoras shall go up "pulito."

The sketch being by this time finished, we go down, talking always of the Sasso Bianco. Clementi is eager for us to achieve the honour of a "prima ascensione," and advocates it with all his eloquence. Giuseppe, anxious that we should attempt nothing in excess of our strength, listens gravely; puts in a question here and there; and reserves his opinion. According to Clementi, nothing can be finer than the view or easier than the ascent, but then he admits that he himself has never been higher than the upper

pastures, and has never seen the view he praises so highly. Still he has gone far enough to survey the ground; he knows that we can certainly ride as far as the last group of châteaux; and he is confident that the walk to the summit cannot be difficult.

On the whole, the thing sounds tempting. Our plans, however, are already laid out for a long excursion to be begun, weather permitting, to-morrow. So the subject of the Sasso Bianco, having been discussed, is for the present dismissed. Dismissed, but not forgotten. Those words "prima ascensione" are Cabalistic, and haunt the memory strangely. They invest the Monte Pezza with a special and peculiar interest; so that it is no longer as other mountains are, but seems henceforth to have a halo round its summit.

But I must not forget the old peasant whom we met a little way below the goat-herd's cross, as we went down that afternoon. He was a fine old man, still handsome, dressed in a new suit of homespun frieze and evidently well-to-do. He was sitting by the path-side. A basket and a long stick lay beside him. As we drew near, he rose and bowed; so being on foot (the men and mules following at a distance) we stopped to speak to him. He, of course, immediately asked where we had been, and where we were going. These are the invariable questions. I said that we had been up to the Sasso di Ronch.

"To the Sasso!" he repeated. "Ah, you have been up to the Sasso! Did you see the ruins of the Castle?"

I replied that, not knowing there were ruins, we had looked for nothing of the kind.

"Aye," he said, shaking his head, "and unless you

knew where to find them, you would never notice them. But they are there. I have seen them myself many a time, when I was younger and could climb like you."

"Do you know to whom the Castle belonged?"

"Si, si, si—lo penso bene! Will the Signoras be pleased to sit, while I tell them all about it?"

With this he resumed his seat on the grassy bank, wiped his brow with his handkerchief, and talked away with the air of one who was accustomed to be listened to.

The Castle, he said, was built by the Visconti—the cruel Visconti of Milan. They erected it towards the close of the Fourteenth century, to overawe the "Repubblica" of Rocca, over which they then exercised a nominal sovereignty. But when the rule of the Visconti came to an end, the "brava" commune, fearing lest the nobles of Belluno should seize and occupy this stronghold to the ruin of the people, pulled it down, leaving scarce one stone standing upon another. That was between four and five centuries ago. Then the nobles of Belluno, finding they could obtain no footing on the mountain, went and built the Castle of Andraz up yonder in the valley of Buchenstein, and there made themselves a terror to all the country. Had the Signoras seen the Castle of Andraz? Ah, well, that too was now a ruin—pulled down by the French in 1866, according to international treaty. As for the antico castello up by the Sasso, it was like an old tree of which the trunk was cut down, and only the roots left. Nothing remained of it but the foundations. Being built of the rock, they looked so like

the rock that you might pass them a hundred times without observing them. There were not many people now living, he said, who knew where to look for them. When he was a young man, the contadini used to go up and dig there for hidden treasure; but they had always been frightened away by the demons. The ruins were full of demons underground, in the subterraneous dungeons, the entrances to which were now lost. They were wont to appear in the form of snakes, and they raised terrible storms of wind and thunder to drive away those who sought to discover the secrets of the ruin. Had he ever seen the demons himself? Why, no—he could not say that he had; for he had never cared to tempt the Devil by going to dig for treasure; but he had seen and heard the tempest raging up there about the top of the mountain, many and many a time, when it was fair weather down in the valley. And he had once known a man who went up at midnight on the eve of Santo Giovanni, to dig in a certain spot where he had dreamed he should find buried gold. When he had dug a deep hole, Ecco! his spade struck against an earthen pot, and he thought his fortune was made; but when he took the lid off the pot, there came out only five small black snakes, no bigger than your finger. At this sight, being both alarmed and disappointed, he up with his spade and cut one of these little snakes in twain; and lo! in one instant, the hole that he had dug was full of snakes—big, black, venomous, twisted, hissing snakes, thousands and thousands of them, all pouring out upon him in a hideous throng, so that he had to fly for his life, and only escaped death by a miracle!

“But has nothing ever been found in the ruins?”

I asked, when at the end of this story the old man paused to take breath.

"Nothing but rubbish, Signora," he replied. "A few small coins—a rusty casque or two—some fragments of armour—niente più!"

He would have talked on for an hour, if we could have stayed to listen to him; but we were in haste, and now wished him good-day. So he rose again, took off his hat, and in quaint, set terms wished us "good health, a pleasant journey, a safe return, and the blessing of God."

The rest of that afternoon was spent in laying out our route by the map; unpacking and selecting stores; and endeavouring to solve the oft-propounded problem of how to get the contents of a large portmanteau into a small black bag. For the days of caretti, landaus, and carriage-roads were over. Henceforth our ways would lie among mountain paths and unfrequented mule-tracks, and to-morrow we must start upon an expedition of at least ten days with only as much luggage as each could carry packed behind her own saddle. Giuseppe, it was arranged, should carry the sketching traps, and Clementi the provision basket. In this order we were to take a long round beginning with Cencenighe and Agordo, going thence to Primiero, Paneveggio and Predazzo, and coming home by Campidello and the Fedaja pass. In the meanwhile L.'s maid was to be left in charge of the rooms, and under the kindly care of the Pezzés.
