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Untrodden peaks and unfrequented valleys

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Leipzig, 1873

Chapter XI. The Fassa Thal and the Fedaja Pass

horses with iron shoes, and carrying enormous bells about their necks—we make our entry into the town. The children run out into the road and shout at our approach. The elder folks come to their house-doors and stare in silence. The Austrian gendarme at the door of the guard-house lifts two fingers to the side of his cap in military fashion, as we pass. Then, emerging upon an open space of scattered houses surrounding the two churches, we find ourselves at the door of a large, old-fashioned, many-windowed inn, the very counterpart of the ancient “Stern” at Innsbruck, over the arched entrance to which swings a gilded ship—the sign of the Nave d’Oro.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FASSA THAL AND THE FEDAJA PASS.

A Village in a Crater—Predazzo and its Commerce—Prosperity *versus* Picturesqueness—Footsteps of the Etruscans—The Val d’Avisio—Moena—The Porphyry of the Fassa Thal—Vigo and the Fat Maiden—Campidello—Monte Vernale—The Gorge of the Avisio—The Fedaja Alp and the Fedaja Lake—The Gorge of Sottoguda again—Home to Caprile.

THE most unscientific observer sees at a first glance that the lakes of Albano and Nemi occupy the craters of extinct volcanos. The craters are there, cup-like, distinct, and tell their own story. You must climb a mountain-side to get to the level of them. You stand on the rim of one; you look down into it; you may walk all round it; or descend to the water-level at the bottom. Nothing can be clearer, or more satisfactory. But it is startling to be told that Predazzo occupies

just such an extinct crater, and that the mountains which hem it in on all sides—the Monte Mulat, the Monte Viesena, the Weisshorn and others—consist of igneous rock thrown up, lava-like, from that ancient centre at some incalculably remote period of geologic history. For here is neither cone, nor mountain, nor amphitheatre of convergent slopes; nothing, in short, in the appearance of either the alluvial flat or the surrounding heights which may at all correspond to one's preconceived ideas of volcanic scenery.

Yet here, as we are told by Richthofen and others, there must once have been a great eruptive centre, breaking out again and again, and each time throwing up a different kind of rock:—first Syenite; then Tourmaline granite; then Uralite porphyry; then melaphyr; then, last of all, porphyrite, and the unique Syenite porphyry, famous for its crystals, and unknown elsewhere.*

It is this great variety in the material of the Predazzo rocks, and the immense mineralogical wealth consequent upon this variety, that has for more than a century attracted hither so many men of science from all parts of Europe.

The town—now quiet enough, except as regards its commercial activity—is said to occupy the centre of the ancient crater. It stands, at all events, midway between Cavalese and Moena, just at the junction of the Fiemme or Fleims valley with the Val Travnigolo. It is a very prosperous place. The people, though an

* For a brief and intelligible account of the geology of the Fiemme, Fassa, Ampezzo, and other S. Tyrolean valleys, I cannot do better than refer the reader to Mr. G. C. Churchill's "Physical Description of the Dolomite Region," which forms the concluding chapter of "The Dolomite Mountains."

Italian-speaking race, are wholly Austrian in their sympathies, and are supposed to come chiefly of a Teutonic stock. They are particularly intelligent, industrious, and energetic. They have a fertile valley which they know how to cultivate, and mountains rich in mineral products which they are rapidly and successfully developing. As iron-masters, as hay-merchants, as wood-contractors, they carry on an extensive Northern trade, and travel annually for purposes of commerce in Germany, Hungary, Transylvania, and Switzerland. Large iron-foundries and long lines of busy saw-mills give an unwonted air of activity to the place. New works, new yards, new and substantial dwelling-houses, are rapidly springing up in every direction. A new Gothic church with a smart roof of gaily coloured tiles, red, green, and yellow, has lately been erected on the South side of the village and there become the centre of an increasing suburb. The schools are said to be excellent; and a well-informed priest from whom I learned most of the foregoing particulars, said the children were full of spirit and intelligence. He also told me that there were now no noble families in Predazzo; but only a wealthy territorial and commercial middle class. He estimated the gross population of the Commune at something over 3000 souls.

Prosperity and picturesqueness, however, are not wont to travel hand in hand; and it must be admitted that these foundries and timber-yards by no means add to the pastoral beauty of the valley. They spoil it for the artist, just as the mills and factories of the last twenty years have spoiled the once romantic valley of Glarus in Switzerland. Still, down among the wooden houses in the old part of the village, where

the women wash their vegetables and fill their pitchers at the stone fountain in the middle of the street, some quaint Prout-like subjects may yet be found. The old church, with its characteristic Tyrolese belfry and steep gable-roof, is charmingly mediæval, and the view from the meadows at the back of the Nave d'Oro, bringing in the two churches and looking straight up the Val Travignolo to where the Cimon della Pala and the Cima della Vezzana tower up against the distant horizon, seemed to me quite worth a careful sketch.

While I was making the sketch—sitting in the shade of a little shrine among the field-paths—two Austrian soldiers came by, and stayed to look on. They were simple, friendly fellows; natives of Trient, and quartered, they said, with three others of their regiment, in Predazzo. Not knowing that they acted in the double capacity of local police and military patrol, I asked what they could find to do in so peaceful a place.

"Nay, Signora," said the one who talked most, "we have the work of ten men upon our hands. Night and day alike, we patrol the woods, roads and passes for twelve miles in every direction. Our rounds are long and fatiguing—our intervals of rest, very brief. We get but one day's rest in every seven, and one night in every four or five."

I afterwards learned that there were five other soldiers quartered at Cavalese, as many more at Moena, and so on throughout every petty commune; and that, according to the general impression, the men were greatly overworked.

The Nave d'Oro (without disparagement of the

inns at either Caprile or Primiero) was undoubtedly the best albergo we came upon during the whole tour. The house is large, clean, and well-furnished; the food excellent; and the accommodation in every way of a superior character. The landlord—Francesco Giacomelli by name—is a sedate, well-informed man; a fair mineralogist and geologist; and proud to tell of the illustrious savants who have from time to time put up at his house and explored the neighbourhood under his guidance. He keeps collections of local minerals for sale, among which the orthoclase crystals struck us as being extraordinarily large and beautiful.

Lying among these crystals, in one of Signor Giacomelli's specimen-cases, the writer observed a small penannular bronze bracelet of Etruscan pattern and very delicate workmanship, coated with the fine green rust of antiquity; and learned on enquiry that it had been discovered with other similar objects in the cutting of a new road near the neighbouring village of Ziano. The "find" consisted of a sword, a torque, some fibulæ, a number of bronze pins, and several bracelets; all of which, with this one exception, were immediately purchased by a Viennese gentleman who chanced to be staying in Predazzo at the time. It is singular that no vases seem to have been found, and no masonry to indicate that the road-makers had broken into a tomb. It seemed rather as if some warrior had been hastily laid in earth, just as he fell. On the other hand, however, this little bracelet (which being accidentally mislaid, had escaped the Viennese collector, and so came to be bought for a few francs by myself) was evidently a female ornament.

It is interesting to know that like traces of the

Northward migration of the Etruscan races when driven by the Gauls from their settlements on the Po, have been found at Matrey, Sonnenburg, and other places of S. Tyrol:—one notable instance being the discovery of an inscribed bronze bucket near the mouth of the Val di Cembra (which is, in fact, a Westward prolongation of the Fiemme Valley) in 1828. I myself saw, in the little museum of Signor Sartoris at Primiero, a small aryballos-shaped vase of yellow clay with red ornamentation, which I should undoubtedly take to be of Etruscan workmanship, and which they told me had been found by himself in a field not far from the town. Of the remarkable sepulchral discoveries made at St. Ulrich in the Grödner-Thal, A. D. 1848, and of Herr Pürger's interesting Etruscan objects found in those graves, I shall have to tell farther on.

The Nave d'Oro at Predazzo is a curious old house, and has belonged to the Giacomelli family for many centuries. The Giacomellis, as I have said elsewhere, were once noble, and their armorial bearings still decorate many of the old carved doorways, ceilings, and chimney-pieces of their ancestral home; but that was long ago, and they have been innkeepers now for more than a century. Their visitors' book is quite a venerable volume, and contains, among the usual irrelevant rubbish of such collections, the handwriting of Humboldt, Fuchs, Richthofen, Sir Roderick Murchison, the Elie de Beaumonts, and other European celebrities. But some nefarious autograph-hunter has abstracted one of the greatest treasures the book contained—the signature of the discoverer of the Georgium Sidus.

Here too, being one of the latest entries, a certain Dr. Reinhart of Munich had exercised his Latinity in the following pithy sentence:—

“Viator! Cave Tabernam Bernhart in Campidello!”

This ominous caution—so much the more impressive for being so vague—had the effect of deciding us against putting up for a night, or even for a midday rest, at the albergo in question. How many travellers since then, I wonder, have like us accepted the good Doctor’s salutary warning? And what would have happened to us if we had neglected it?

The Val Fiemme, or Fleims Thal (about the middle of which Predazzo is situated), is but one portion of an immensely long tortuous valley called in part the Val Fassa, in part the Val Fiemme, in part the Val Cembra, which begins with the source of the Avisio in that depression between the Marmolata and the Monte Padon which is known as the Fedaja pass, and ends where the torrent debouches into the Eisack at Lavis, seven miles north of Trient. The collective name for this chain of valleys is the Val d’Avisio; and, except at quite the upper end of the Fassa division, it is the least picturesque of any that came within the compass of our journey.

Leaving Predazzo after one day of rest—for, however attractive to geologists and mineralogists, it has no excursions to repay the unscientific visitor—we next pursued our course up the valley, purposing to put up for a couple of nights at Vigo in the Fassa Thal, and thence to explore the cirque of the Rosengarten, and ascend the Sasso dei Mugoni.

It is a dull day when we start, having a somewhat dull journey before us. Our way lies at first between

a double range of low hills partly clothed with pine-forest, and partly with scrub. These hills, which are of the dark igneous rock thrown up from the Predazzo crater, hide the loftier peaks and are not picturesque at all. By and by comes a long straight road, terminated miles away by the village of Moena. Going along this road, a few unmistakeably Dolomitic summits begin to peer up here and there above the barren hills to the left; and straight ahead, far beyond Moena, rises the Monte Boé, looking like an immense fort on a grand pedestal of rock, its battlements lost in the clouds. This Monte Boé, the southernmost bastion of the huge Sella Massive, is also known as the Monte Pordoi. It has been ascended by Dr. Grohmann, who calculates its height at 10,341 feet.

Passing through Moena—a large, straggling, wood-cutting village—and crossing a couple of bridges, we leave the high road and strike up a steep mule-path on the opposite bank of the torrent. It is the same valley, and the same water; but here above Moena, it is called the Fassa Thal. Looking back from this higher ground, we get a fine view over the Monte Latemar (8,983 feet) and its far-reaching fir-forests; while the wild peaks of the Rosengarten and Lang Kofel come into sight above the lower slopes of Costalunga.

And now, in rich contrast to the pallid Dolomites soaring high in the distance, the famous porphyry of the Fassa Thal begins to break out in crimson patches among the lower hills, and to appear in the cliff-walls that border the Avisio far below. Yonder, where the stream takes a sudden bend, two isolated porphyry pillars jut out on either side, forming a natural portal

through which the narrowed waters rush impetuously. A little farther still, and a whole mountain side of the precious marble, quarried terrace above terrace, and apparently of inexhaustible richness, is laid bare to view. Now we recross the stream, and pass through the village of Soraga. Here everything, except the grass and the trees, is crimson. The ploughed fields are crimson; the mud underfoot is crimson; the little torrent hurrying down the ravine by the roadside is crimson; the very puddles are crimson also. Even the roads are mended with porphyry, and great blocks of it lie piled by the wayside, waiting for the hammer of the stonebreaker.

The sky, which has all day been murky, now seems to be coming down lower and lower, like a heavy grey curtain. The air grows chill. A cold leaden tint spreads over the landscape; and the long dull road seems to grow longer and duller the farther we follow it. At length we come in sight of Vigo, a village clustered high upon a hill-side to the left, backed by lofty slopes of fir-forest, down which the gathering mists are creeping fast. A steep path leads up to the village, whence, looking over to the north-east where the horizon is still clear, we catch a momentary endwise glimpse of the Marmolata.

And now we are overtaken by a smiling lad with a bunch of wild strawberries in his hat, who turns out to be young Rizzi, son of old Rizzi who keeps the albergo up here at Vigo—a large, dark, dreary house, the entrance to which lies through a filthy cart-shed and up a staircase that looks as if it had not been scrubbed for the last half century. Here we are received by the landlord's daughter, a fat, bouncing,

rosy-cheeked damsel of inexhaustible activity and good humour, who does her best to make us welcome. The inn, however, proves to be quite full, with the exception of one big, treble-bedded room with windows looking to east and north, and a ceiling about seven feet from the floor. And we are fortunate to secure even this; for before we have been half an hour in possession of it, there arrives a party of Germans—hungry, noisy mountaineers, regularly got up for work, with ropes, ice-hatchets, and hobnailed boots—for whom beds have to be made on the landing.

A chill, drizzly evening, a supper irregularly served, and boisterous neighbours in the adjoining rooms, caused us, perhaps unjustly, to take a dislike to Vigo. The house, too, was full of foul smells; and a manure-heap in the cow-yard under one of our windows did not help to improve the atmosphere. So when morning came, bringing a sea of white mist that extinguished all the mountain-tops, we decided to start for home as quickly as possible. In vain the fat maiden represented that to-day it would surely rain, and that if we only delayed till to-morrow we should be certain of magnificent views and splendid weather. In vain she exhausted her eloquence to prove the absurdity of our attacking the Fedaja pass in mist and rain. We did not believe that it was going to be wet; we knew we could take the Fedaja again from Caprile any day we chose; and we were determined to go home.

So by half-past six A.M., behold us on the road again, delighted to get away from Vigo, and hoping for a tolerable day.

It is a sweet, fresh morning. The vapours are

rolling and rising; the clouds parting; and stray gleams of sunshine gliding now and then across the hill-sides. But the mountain-tops, continue to be veiled in masses of soft, white haze, and only thrust a tusk out here and there. Confident, however, of fine weather, we laugh the fat maiden to scorn, and ride on our way, exulting.

The valley now grows in beauty at every turn. At Mazin we come upon a picturesque hamlet with a background of ravine and waterfall; and, approaching Campidello, look out anxiously for the strange Dolomite peaks that overhang the village. The mist is thick; but there they are, gleaming grey and ghost-like. Here, too, is the little albergo against which we have been warned by Dr. Reinhart of Munich. It looks rather pretty; but the sight of two extremely dirty and ill-favoured dwarfs,—a man and woman—who come out upon the balcony to stare at the travellers, quite confirms us in the satisfaction with which we ride past the house.

A little higher up the valley we reach the villages of Gries and Canazei; and, stopping for only a few minutes at Canazei to feed and water the mules, push on rapidly for the Fedaja. Still the scenery continues to increase in beauty. On the hillsides are corn-slopes, woods, and pastures; in the valley, a rushing stream babbles among tamarisk trees and pines. Soon, a fine pyramidal mountain, black and precipitous on the one side, sheeted with snow on the other, comes into sight at the head of an opening valley to the right. We take it at first for the Marmolata; but it proves to be the Monte Vernale, a less lofty but far more difficult

mountain, still unascended, and calculated at 9,845 feet in height.

Now the path turns off to the left, threading the two miserable hamlets of Alba and Penia, and rising rapidly through a grand rocky gorge which gets finer and more savage the higher it climbs. Steep precipices shut it in on the one hand, and barren slopes battlemented with jagged rocks upon the other. The Avisio, here a mere thread of torrent, foams from rock to rock in innumerable tiny cascades. Wide-spreading firs and larches make a green roof overhead, and the path is carpeted with fragrant spines upon which the mules tread noiselessly. Presently we come in sight of a fine waterfall that, issuing from a fissure in the face of the great cliff to the right, descends in two bold leaps and vanishes amid the depths of the fir forest below.

The gorge now closes in nearer and steeper, our upward path being indicated by the giddy windings of a little hand-rail which scales the face of a huge rock straight ahead. It is here too steep and slippery for riding, so we dismount and walk.

Alas! the fat maiden was right, after all. The mist which has been lightly drifting in our faces for the last half hour, now sets in with a will, and becomes a steady pour. Drenched and silent, we toil up the stony path and wish ourselves back at Vigo. An hour hence, says Clementi, we shall come to some chalets and cattle-sheds; but there is no Hospice to look forward to here, as on most other passes. By and by, however, where the climb attains its worst pitch of steepness and slipperiness, we pass a succession of little carved and coloured "Stazione" nailed

at short intervals against the rock, for the benefit of such pious souls as may care to say a few Aves by the way; and these lead to a tiny chapel not much bigger than a sentry-box, into which we are thankful to creep for temporary shelter. A wretched crucifixion by some village artist, a few faded wild flowers in a broken mug, and a multitude of votive hearts, arms, legs, eyes and so forth, in tinsel and coloured wax, decorate the little altar; while securely embedded in a niche in the wall, chained, padlocked, and iron-bound, there stands a small coffer with a slit in the lid, for the reception of stray soldi.

Here, glad of even a few minutes' respite from the pitiless deluge without, we wring the rain from our dripping garments, and divide with the men what we have left of bread and wine; not forgetting the wet and melancholy mules, who receive a lump of bread apiece, and are comforted by L. with bits of sugar.

It is still pouring when we go on again, and it continues to pour steadily. For full another hour we keep on under these pleasant circumstances, always on foot; and then, quite suddenly, find ourselves close under the western end of the Marmolata. Invisible till this moment, it now looms out all at once in startling proximity. A great blue wrinkled glacier, reaching down out of the mist like a terrible Hand, grasps the grey rock overhead; while beyond and above it, a vast field of stainless snow slopes up into the clouds, without sign of end or limit.

Turning from this grand spectacle to the rocky shelf we have just reached, we find ourselves in a garden of wild flowers. There were none in the gorge

below; none by the path-side coming up; but here they are beautiful and abundant, as if fair Earine had lately passed this way, the flowers following in her track:—

“As she had sow’d them with her odorous foot!”

Wetter than wet through one can hardly be; so we despatch Clementi up the rock to fetch some bunches of the rare, white, velvety Edelweiss, while we quickly gather such lower plants as grow within easy reach. Thus in the pelting rain we secure some specimens of the *Orobis luteus*, *Dryas octopetala*, *Primula Farinosa*, *Pinguicula grandiflora*, *Cynanchum Vincitoxicum*, *Orchis nigra*, &c., &c.; besides several varieties of cyclamen, gentians, and ferns.

Again a little higher, and we reach the summit of the pass—a lonely upper world of rich sward, bounded on the left by the splintered peaks of Monte Padon, and on the right by the lower slopes of the Marmolata, which rises direct from the grassy level on which we stand. This is the Piana Fedaja, or Fedaja Alp. A dozen or so of rough wooden châteaux are here clustered together; mere cattle-refuges and hay-sheds, one of which, being a trifle more air-tight than the rest, is decorated with a coloured Christus over the doorway, and serves as a sleeping place for travellers who are about to make the ascent of the mountain.

The rain now abates somewhat of its violence, and, the way being once more level, riding again becomes practicable. Thus we go on; a second and a third great glacier creeping into sight as the first is left behind. These each show a brown margin of moraine; the last glacier being of immense extent,

as large apparently as the lower glacier of Grindelwald. While we are yet looking at them, however, a tall, strange, ghost-like mist stalks swiftly across the snow, and veils all but the brown rocks abutting on the pass. In a moment the great mountain has melted away, and we see it no more.*

The Fedaja Alp is just the width of the Marmolata, and no more. It begins with the Western, and ends with the Eastern extremity of the mountain. Here, at the foot of the huge dark rock known as the Piz Seranta, lies an exquisite little dark green tarn surrounded by slopes of crimson Alp-roses. The rain having now ceased for a moment, its waters, ruffled only by the flight of a small brown moor-hen, are as placid as a sheet of green glass.

Another yard or two of rocky path, and we come to an upright, mossy stone bearing an illegible inscription. This is the ancient boundary stone between Italy and Austria—one of the few divisions left unchanged at the last readjustment of the frontier-line. Half of the Marmolata belongs to the House of Hapsburg, and half to the kingdom of Italy. The line of demarcation is ingeniously carried along the topmost ridge of ice and glacier, so that, unless by members of the different European Alpine clubs, it is not very likely to become a disputed territory.

From this point, all is descent. Our way lies

* The height of the Marmolata, though proved to exceed that of the Cimon della Pala, is not yet thought to be satisfactorily ascertained. The Austrian "Kataster" measurement gives 11,466 feet; while Dr. Grohmann gives a barometrical elevation of only 11,045 feet. Mr. Ball arrived within a few feet of the summit of the second peak of the Marmolata in 1860; Dr. Grohmann ascended it unsuccessfully in 1862, and made the first ascent of the highest summit in 1864. Mr. Tuckett made the second ascent 1865, by a new and more direct course, and repeated the achievement in 1869.

along a vast green slope, following the course of the Candiarei torrent, but running for a long distance upon the brink of a ruinous gully partly choked with yet unmelted snow. For the path on the Candiarei side has been lately swept away by a torrent of snow and water from the Marmolata, and the whole mountain slope is here one mass of soft red mud, more slippery than ice, full of pits and fissures, and very difficult. Lower down still, the track lies through rich park-like pastures deep in wild-flowers; so bringing us at last to the upper end of the Sottoguda gorge.

No sooner have we entered the defile than the clouds clear off as if by magic. The sun then bursts out in splendour, lighting up the rocks first on one side and then on the other, according as the ravine winds its narrow way. Our wet garments steam as if hung before a blazing fire. The men take off their coats, and carry them on their alpenstocks to dry. The mules prick their ears and rub their noses together, as if whispering to each other that there is a scent of home upon the air, and that the old familiar stable cannot surely be far distant.

Nor is it; for already we have emerged into the Val Pettorina. These green slopes to the left are the slopes of Monte Migion; these fir-woods to the right are the woods of Monte Pezza. Presently come the dilapidated hamlets of Sottoguda and Sorara; then Rocca on its hillside; then the familiar path down by the torrent-side and across the wooden bridge; then at last Caprile, where a warm welcome awaits us, a heap of English letters, and rest.
