ON THE PELMO.

FROM A SKETCH BY D W. FRESHFIELD.

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## The Pelmo. By The Editor.

Lacs de moire, coteaux bleus,
Ciel où le nuage passe,
Large espace,
Monts aux rochers anguleux.

Théophile Gautier.

EVEN in the Venetian Tyrol the tendency of tourists to choose the colder pine-clad north in place of the more tender and varied grace of the south has become observable. Cortina, Caprile and the Val Fassa are even now, in everything but prices, on the downward path of corruption. But away to the south and outside the 'regular round' there are still many quiet nooks known as yet only to those who

'love to enter pleasure by a postern,
Not the broad populous gate which gulps the mob.'

It is across the Italian frontier, and not amongst the stern peaks and solemn pines of Cortina, or in the savage gorge of Landro, that we find the nature which Titian so often sketched and painted. In the foregrounds of the northern dolomite country there is a commonplace stiffness and want of variety, which even the weird crags of the Drei Zinnen or Coll' Agnello cannot render romantic; it lacks the noble spaciousness, the soft and changeful beauties of the southern region. Its character is German in the place of Italian, it reminds us rather of Dürer than of Titian. It excites and interests the appetite for the wonderful rather than soothes and satisfies our longing for complete and harmonious beauty.

Landscapes composed of blue surging waves of mountains, broken by sharp fins and tusks of rock, of deep skies peopled with luminous masses of white cloud are familiar to the eyes of thousands who have never seen Italy nor heard of a dolo-

mite. Side by side with the wide sunny spaces, the soft hills and unclouded heaven of the early schools of Perugia and Tuscany, they remain to us as types of what Italian art found most beautiful and sympathetic in nature. The hill-villages of Val di Zoldo claim our interest as the frequent haunts of Titian; while wandering between them we are amongst the influences which impressed his boyhood, and were afterwards the sources of his inspiration. The Pelmo may on good ground assert itself as Titian's own mountain. Mr. Gilbert, in his 'Cadore,' has shown it us as it stands over against the painter's native town; and it is impossible to turn over the fac-similes of the master's drawings contained in that charming volume without being persuaded that he drew the mountain from life more than once, and from his recollection of it very frequently.

Val di Zoldo resembles many of the Venetian valleys in being shaped like a long-necked bottle. In its lower portion a narrow gorge, hemmed in by beetling crags, it expands at its head into what, seen from any vantage-ground, shows as a broad sunny basin, divided by green ridges into a labyrinth of fertile glens. The outlines of these ridges are symmetrical in themselves, and they are grouped together in a constantly shifting but harmonious complexity. Away to the south the horizon is fringed by splintered edges of dolomite, black as the receding night when cut clear against the first orange of dawn, or pale gold in the palpable haze of an Italian noon, or crimson with the reflected rays of sunset. As the paths cross the crests from glen to glen the snowy boss of the Antelao, or the painted cliffs of the Sorapis tower loftily over the low intervening ridge which divides Zoppè from the Val d'Ampezzo. But (to accept the hypothesis of Von Richthofen) the great glory of Val di Zoldo lies in the chance which led the coral insects to select the plateaux lying behind the hamlets of Pecol and Brusadaz for pedestals on which to plant their two noblest efforts, the huge wall of the Civita and the tower of the Pelmo. Elsewhere in the dolomite country edifices may be seen covering a wider space of ground, or decorated with more fantastic pinnacles, the Westminster Palaces and Milan Cathedrals of their order. But these two works belong to the best style or period of insect art; their builders have shown that simplicity of intention and subordination of detail to a central controlling purpose which mark the highest of the comparatively puny efforts of their human competitors.

To travellers the Civita is best known by its north-western face, to which the little Lake of Alleghe lends a picturesque

charm sure to catch the fancy of every passer-by. The structure of the mountain as seen from Val di Zoldo appears less intricate; and if the cliffs are not so perpendicular, the prevailing angle from base to cope is steeper. Its crags, glittering with rain or sprinkled with recent snow, shine out at an incredible height athwart the slant rays of a setting sun; in the cloudless morning hours they become ordinary rocks up which the experienced cragsman detects a path, safe enough when the spring is over and the upper ledges have 'voided their rheum.'

To the mind of the climber who wanders beneath its cliffs I know not what incongruous fancies the Pelmo may not suggest. From Val Fiorentina and Santa Lucia its broad shoulders and massive head resemble an Egyptian sphynx; as we move southwards one of the shoulders becomes detached, and the mountain is transformed into a colossal antediluvian cub crouching beside its parent. When clouds part to show the vast glittering crest which overlooks Val di Zoldo we seem to realise 'the great and high wall' of the city coming down from heaven of Apocalyptic vision. If we ever have a 'Practical Tyrol,' the likeness of the solid mass seen from the Ampezzo road to the Round Tower of Windsor will probably be remarked on,—and there will be a certain amount of vulgar truth in the observation.

One of the easiest paths to Val di Zoldo starts from Alleghe, and has been described by Messrs. Gilbert and Churchill. From Caprile, the more usual point of departure, there is a direct track which first attacks the mountain with the headstrong energy of a novice, and then takes a long breathing space along the level. After passing several bunches of farmhouses, clinging to the steep sides of Monte Fernazza like flies to a window-pane, it again climbs up through woods to the hamlet of Coi.* The needful height is then won, and a green terrace, overhanging Alleghe and looking into the heart of the Civita, leads to the great rolling down which spreads out towards the Pelmo.

Heavy clouds, charged with electricity and rain, had swept about from peak to peak during our walk from Caprile, and the greyness of evening was deepened by falling rain as we splashed down the wet path from Pecol. Near the river, and nestling under a steep bank crowned by a far-seen church and spire, we came upon the inn of San Nicolò. It stands a little back from the path behind a courtyard, a tall three-storied house, hanging out no vulgar sign of entertainment for man

* Not the hamlet of the same name subsequently mentioned.

and beast. At the top of the three stories are two bedrooms, clean and spotless, hung with engravings, and furnished with the air of conscious wealth of a farmhouse best parlour. Their windows give an exquisite glimpse down the deep glen which falls towards Forno di Zoldo, and across to a high ridge capped by a most fantastic fence of dolomite splinters. But if the upstairs rooms are bright and comfortable, they have not the homely charm of the great groundfloor kitchen. It is a wide room, ranged round with rows of lustrous brass pans, alternating with generous full-bodied wide-mouthed jugs, which could never give a drop less than the measure painted across them. At one end is the fireplace, of the sort common in southern Tyrol, a deep semi-circular bow forming a projection in the outer wall of the house; the floor is slightly raised, and a bench runs round it, leaving the centre to be used for the hearth: an arrangement which seems to solve the problem of the greatest happiness of the greatest number better even than an old English chimney-corner.

The structure which supports—not the fire, for that lies on the hearthstone, but the pots and pans which may be cooking upon it—is a piece of smith's work, enriched with wrought-out conventional foliage, chains, and two noble brass griffins: all the character of the workman has been stamped into the metal, and comes out even in the irregularities of detail which Birmingham might call defects. A modern and native product, however, as our host with pardonable pride assures us, and the best that the neighbouring forges of Forno di Zoldo can send out.

The master of the house proved to be a man of wealth and position in his native valley. He knew Venice well, and something of the more distant world. 'What can one do?' he said, in answer to our compliments on his house; 'in the mountains there are no cafés, no theatres; one must build a fine house, and get what novelty one can from strangers; but,' he added with a sigh, 'there are not so many.'

In the gloom of a wet evening the conquest of the Pelmo on the morrow seemed little more than a slender hope. Still, in the Alps successes are chiefly won by being always prepared for the best, and we were resolved not to lose a chance. In the matter of guides, however, we found a difficulty. We were ourselves but poorly provided. In the Alps only for a fortnight, it had not seemed to me worth while to summon my friend François Devouassoud from his far-off home; while Tucker's hope of securing the services of Santo Siorpaes of Cortina had been disappointed. The native of Caprile who

had carried our wraps was a pleasant fellow, but he had never been on the Pelmo, where, if anywhere, local knowledge is indispensable. It was with some dismay, therefore, that we first learnt that no hunter who knew the mountain could be found nearer than Brusadaz, a hamlet an hour off. However, Brusadaz turned out to be on the way to the Pelmo, and in the early morning we could reckon on finding the inhabitants at home.

As at 5 A.M. we took the path which wound round the hill rising above the church of San Nicolò, the sawblade of Monte Piacedel cut a clear sky to the southwards. Brusadaz was soon discovered lying in the centre of a natural theatre, which opens into the main valley very near its fork at Forno di Zoldo, and is directly overlooked on the north by the Pelmo, a square block of smooth, solid and inaccessible precipice. The hunter Augusto di Marco, to whom we bore an introduction, was quickly forthcoming, and with unusual but welcome readiness, in five minutes prepared to lead us to the mountain. Our luck seemed altogether good, for the stonemen on the Pelmo were clear of mist, and we promised ourselves a day of more than usual enjoyment.

A steep grassy bank severs the quiet hollow of Brusadaz from the Zoppè branch of the valley. We reached the crest at some distance from the base of the Pelmo, and had to follow an up-and-down track in order to gain the lower end of the Campo di Rutorto, a broad level pasturage, lying at the eastern foot of the mountain. The cliffs, up which a way was to be made, were now before us; but we found, to our surprise, that their appearance—partially veiled, it is true, by floating mists—was almost as discouraging as that of the southern face.

There is scarcely any summit in the Alps which from every point of view presents so formidable an appearance as the Pelmo. Time, and the various forces of nature, almost invariably create a breach in the defences of great mountains. Here, however, their work has been left unfinished. The upper cliffs are, it is true, broken on the east by a long slope, where, after a fresh fall, snow lies in such quantities as to show that it is easy of ascent. But this snow, when, as in spring, it has accumulated to a sufficient mass, falls from the bottom of the slope over a perpendicular cliff of at least 1,000 feet in height. It is only at what may be called the northern cape of the bay formed by the whole S.E. or Zoppè face of the mountain, that the ridge dividing the Campo di Rutorto from Val Ruton runs up, buttress-like, against the cliffs to a point not perhaps more than 400 or 500 feet lower than the

bottom of the upper breach, but fully half a mile distant from it; and the cliffs along this half-mile are quite hopeless in appearance.

It was consequently with some surprise that we found ourselves climbing the buttress in question, and, as far as we could see, about to run our heads against the wall-like rocks on which it rested. Before setting foot on the crags the rope was uncoiled and brought into use. We at once found sufficient employment for our muscles in making long steps, or rather lifts of the body, from ledge to ledge of a rockface, the angle of which (disregarding our footholds) appeared to approximate very closely on 90. The transverse shelves, however, afforded excellent support, and made our progress a matter of perfect security.

Above the first 150 feet a narrow gully disclosed itself, which led us to higher and more broken rocks. Then, again, the wall looked perfectly smooth, upright and unassailable. On the last place where it could have found room to rest was a low pile of stones. Standing beside it, we began for the first time to comprehend the key to our dilemma; we were now to turn our faces to the left, and to attempt the formidable task of traversing the face of the Pelmo. Our pathway was before us, a horizontal ledge or groove, at present a few feet broad, shortly narrowing so as to afford only sufficient standing-ground, threatening before long not to do even this. The cliffs around us bent into deep recesses, and each time a projecting angle was reached, the side of the bay seen opposite appeared wholly smooth and impassable.

This portion of the ascent of the Pelmo is, in my limited experience, one of the most impressive, and at the same time enjoyable, positions in which a climber can find himself. Even a sluggish imagination has here enough to stimulate it. The mysterious pathway, unseen from a short distance, seems to open for the mountaineer's passage, and to close up again behind him as he advances. The stones he dislodges, after two or three long bounds, disappear with a whirr into a sheer depth of seething mist, of which the final far-off crash reveals the immensity. The overhanging rocks above, the absence of any resting-place even for the eye below, do not allow him for a moment to forget that the crags to which he clings form part of one of the wildest precipices in Europe.

To walk for a mile or so along a ledge no broader than the sill which runs underneath the top story windows of a London square, with, for twice the height of St. Paul's cross above the pavement, no shelf below wide enough to arrest your fall,

must sound an alarming feat to anyone, except perhaps a professional burglar. And yet to a head naturally free from giddiness, and to nerves moderately hardened by mountain experiences, the full sense of the majesty of the situation need not be disturbed by physical fear. The animal 'homo scandens' is not in the slightest danger. His pedestal may be scanty, but it is sufficient. He can follow his chamois-hunter amongst the abysses with as much confidence as Dante followed the elder poet amidst the boiling gulfs of Tartarus.

As we went on, the height of the groove, and consequently the head-room, became, for a time, inadequate to our requirements, a fact which a moment's inattention seldom failed to impress forcibly on the brains. Let the reader picture himself walking along the mantlepiece and the cornice coming down on him so as to force him to stoop or lie flat. 'Va bene!' cheerily remarked the Brusadaz hunter, in reply to some grumbles on this score, 'it is all as easy as this, except one place, and that is of no consequence.' This place, the 'eccentric obstacle' of the guidebook, arrived in due course, a projecting corner where the ledge was not broken away but partially closed in by a roof of rock. There was just room enough to allow a thin person to lie down in and worm himself round with due care and deliberation; a brilliant climber could find some support for portions of his body on slight knobs below; those who were neither thin nor brilliant had to trust to the rope and their companions. For us who followed an adroit and confident leader, there was little difficulty in the feat, but the happy boldness of our predecessor who, when his companion's courage failed him, himself led the way, did not the less impress us. Mr. Ball, we agreed, had here proved himself in the body as well as in the spirit the true 'Alpine Guide.'*

Having all wound or scrambled past the corner as instinct led us, we followed round yet another bay the faithful ledge. At last the precipice above us broke back, and our guide announced that all difficulty was at an end. And so it proved, at least, as far as nerves and gymnastics were concerned. But to keep up the pace he now set us was no slight task. We raced upwards through the mists at true chamois-hunter speed, over steep slopes now of large broken crags, now of smaller and

* The Pelmo has also been climbed by Messrs. Bryce and Ilbert, and by Mr. and Mrs. Packe. I have satisfied myself by personal inquiry that in each case the same course was followed; and the statement of Augusto di Marco, that it is the best and only tolerably easy one, is probably correct. I have not seen any notice of foreign ascents.

less cohesive fragments, up low cliffs, then over more slopes, until we began to think the mountain interminable. At last, where a stream the hidden roar of which was often heard flashed for a moment into light, I was glad to call a halt. Two buttresses of rock, the ends of the topmost ridges of the Pelmo loomed largely, and, despite our exertions, still loftily overhead; a glimmer of ice shone between them.

We soon came to the glacier, a sheet of uncrevassed ice, sloping slightly from south to north, and filling the large but from below unseen and unsuspected hollow which lies between the horseshoe-shaped battlements of the mountain. 'If the water of the ocean,' writes Professor Huxley, 'could be suddenly drained away we should see the atolls rising from the sea-bed like vast truncated cones, and resembling so many volcanic craters, except that their sides would be steeper than those of an ordinary volcano.' The description exactly fits our peak; and if, reversing the picture, we imagine the level of the Adriatic raised a trifle of 10,000 feet, the glacier would yield its place to a lagoon, and these ridges would exactly represent an atoll of the southern ocean. Our leader at first swerved to the left towards the lower crags which immediately overlooked his native village; turned by our remonstrances, he led us to the highest rocks, a broken crest perfectly easy of access.* The verge of the huge outer cliffs, in some places level up to the extreme edge, and unencumbered with loose stones so as to allow of the closest approach, was gained within a few yards of the stoneman who holds the summit.

Through a framework of mists we could see down from time to time into Val Fiorentina and along the gorge of Sottoguda, but the upper mass of the Marmolata and all the neighbouring peaks were wrapped in dense folds of leaden-coloured cloud; and, feeling that a distant view was hopeless, we hastened to retrace our steps before any wandering storm should burst on the mountain. During the descent the fog became at times thick enough to suggest unpleasant fears of missing the direction. No such calamity, however, occurred; and, gaining a slide on every slope composed of minute enough fragments to allow it, we found ourselves far sooner than we had expected on the brink of the lower precipices. The spot was marked by a patch of dwarf edelweiss, which, in company with other

* The assurance given by the San Vito landlord to Messrs. Gilbert and Churchill, that 'only the final ice-portion was difficult' (*The Dolomite Mountains*, p. 399), was, I need scarcely say, wholly misleading and contrary to fact.

bright but tiny flowering plants, grew here and there upon the mountain. We made our way rapidly back along the ledge; the confidence of experience more than compensating for the inconvenience of the cliff, to which we had often to hold, being now on the left instead of the right hand. Where the direct descent on to the green buttress had to be made we, by keeping a few yards too much to the left, nearly got into a scrape, which was only avoided by a timely acknowledgment of the error. Straight and narrow as is the right path on the Pelmo, all other ways lead to destruction far too palpably not to induce one immediately to return to it.

On the top of the buttress we rejoined our provision sack, and enjoyed a long halt in full view of the Antelao, now towering above the clouds, a gigantic vapour-wreathed pyramid. From this point it is, as we found the next day, but a two hours' walk or ride amongst bilberry-bushes and forests to San Vito on the Ampezzo road. To return to San Nicolò was, however, our present object, and our hunter promised a new and easy path. We rushed rapidly down a very steep funnel to the great patch of avalanche-snow which lies against the base of the cliffs in the centre of the Campo di Rutorto. In the sort of cave left between the crag and snow a jet of water, spouting like a fountain of Moses from the arid rocks, served to fill our cups. A little footpath mounts gently the rhododendron-covered slope beyond, and winds as near as it can creep to the huge mountain. The cliffs above are broken, and in this part there was formerly a possibility of scrambling through them. Our guide declared that owing to a fall of rock, the passage had now become extremely difficult; and his statement gains some confirmation from the fact, that two of my friends who attempted (with a San Vito man) an escalade from this direction, were forced to retreat, one of them with a broken head. While climbing in advance he dislodged with one hand a boulder from a shelf above him, which made its first bound on his skull, fortunately without loosening the firm grasp of his other arm or inflicting any permanent injury. Unstable boulders are the great source of danger in this part of the Alps, and even old climbers require to be constantly reminded that on dolomite rocks they must test before they trust every handhold.*

* It is curious that Santo Siorpaes, when with Mr. Tuckett in 1872, should have proposed to adopt this line of attack, and have passed by the angle of the mountain facing San Vito, the nearest and most natural route from the Val d'Ampezzo.

At the south-eastern angle of the Pelmo the cliff rises sheer for some distance and then a wedge of stone suddenly juts out, overhanging its base to an extent which I fear to estimate in figures, and can only describe as incredible; the under part has fallen and lies on the path, but the huge summit still hangs threateningly overhead, an appropriate gurgoyle for so Titanic an edifice.

The brow beneath it commanded a wide and splendid prospect. To the north the red crags of the Sorapis and the more symmetrical outlines of the Antelao. Turning eastwards, green pasturages and gable-formed ridges filled the foreground; in the distance we looked on the least known portion of the Dolomites, the blue mountains, crested with dark teeth and horns, which encompass remote Cimolais.

A sturdy little goatherd, the first human being we had seen since leaving Brusadaz, here came up to greet us. The boy did not depend on his voice alone to summon his flock; round his shoulders was slung a trumpet, one blast from which sent flying a peal of wild echoes such as the deafest and most obstinate of goats could scarcely have disregarded.

The terrace path continued to skirt the base of the Pelmo, until it reached a platform of pasturage, the Campo sô Pelmo, lying due south of the mountain. After crossing a gentle elevation, we found ourselves on the verge of the hollow of Brusadaz, and turned along a sledge-track leading down the crest between it and the western branch of Val di Zoldo, beyond which the crest of the Civita stood forth high above the belts of vapour. The hamlet of Coi, seated as it were astride the narrow ridge, looks down at once on Brusadaz and San Nicolò; a steep corkscrew path led us in twenty minutes to the latter village, where we found our return had not yet been begun to be expected.*

I cannot bring myself to lay down the pen without paying a tribute to the Italians of the southern Dolomites, rendered, as it seems to me, the more due and necessary by the frequent praises which the Bœotian simplicity of their German-speaking neighbours has received from English writers. A mountaineer may well have a good word for the population of Val di Zoldo. Where else in the Alps will he find a valley the natives of which alone, and unincited by foreign gold, have found their way to the tops of the highest peaks? And let it not be

* We had been absent 10½ hours. The ascent occupied five hours of quick walking, the return, made on the whole much more leisurely, about four; halts accounted for the remaining hour and a half.

thought that this success was an easy one. The Civita, from whatever side it is seen, is of formidable steepness; and, as I have said before, the Pelmo is to the eye of a mountaineer one of the most perplexing peaks in the Alps. Yet the men of Val di Zoldo, by following day after day their game, and learning that the ledge which offered the chamois a means of escape was also for the hunter a means of pursuit, found out at last the secret of the circuitous access to the upper rocks, which had been for centuries a true 'Gemsen-Freiheit.'

I do not doubt that Mr. Ball was the first man to stand on the highest rocks of the Pelmo. Their attainment was probably not an object of sufficient value to the hunters to induce them to cross the upper glacier and brave the peril of being swallowed up alive by some hidden chasm, which weighs a risk heavily on the mind of the peasant who has yet to learn the saving grace of a rope. But the real difficulty lies below, and amateur climbers with foreign guides might have sought long and vainly for the passage which the spirit of the neighbouring villagers had found ready for them.

But it is not alone on the narrow ground of venturesomeness that the people of Val di Zoldo recommend themselves to an English traveller. They possess in a high degree the intelligence and quick courtesy we are accustomed to meet with in Northern Italy. No peasant will pass the stranger as he sits to rest or sketch beside the path without a few bright words of greeting and inquiry, showing often a feeling for natural beauty and a quickness of apprehension rare amongst a secluded population. The slowness alike of mind and of action, the refusal to grasp anything outside their own daily experiences, so common among the peasantry of the Pusterthal, is here unknown. To quote a shrewd observer of manners, 'the men are such gentlemen and the women such ladies, that every chance meeting becomes an interchange of courtesies;' and the traveller, turning northwards, will often have occasion to join in Dickens's regret for what he has left behind, 'the beautiful Italian manners, the sweet language, the quick recognition of a pleasant look or cheerful word, the captivating expression of a desire to oblige in everything.'