Chapter I. Val Maggia.

CHAPTER I.

VAL MAGGIA.

Huge mountains of immeasurable height
Encompass'd all the level valley round
With mighty slabs of rock that sloped upright,
An insurmountable enormous bound;—
That vale was so sequester'd and secluded,
All search for ages past it had eluded. HOOKHAM FRERE.

VAL MAGGIA—BIGNASCO—VAL LAVIZZARA—THE BASODINE—VAL BAVONA—PIZ CAMPO TENCCA—VAL DI PRATO.

THE typical Alpine Clubman has been somewhere described by Mr. Anthony Trollope as cherishing in his bosom, through the ten months of each year in which the business of life debars him from his favourite pursuit, an ever-gnawing desire for the beloved mountains.

For myself, whenever, as I often do, I vent

——— an inward groan
To sit upon an Alp as on a throne

it is accompanied, as in Keats' sonnet, by 'a languishment for skies Italian.' The bright recollections which at once console and harass me during the fogs and snows of our Cimmerian winters owe their existence as much to Italian valleys as to snowy peaks. After a week of hard mountaineering at Zermatt or in the

Oberland, the keen colourless air of the Riffel or Bell Alp begins to pall upon my senses; the pine-woods and châlets to remind me, against my will, of a German box of toys. I sigh for the opal-coloured waves of atmosphere which are beating up against the southern slopes of the mountains, for the soft and varied foliage, the frescoed walls and far-gleaming campaniles of Italy. In such a mood, after a morning spent upon the snows of Monte Rosa or the Adamello, I plunge with the keenest delight amongst the vines of Val Sesia or Val Camonica.

For this morbid tendency, as it is considered by some vigorous friends, I do not propose to offer either defence or apology. Still less do I wish to become a public benefactor by leading on a mob to take possession of my pleasure grounds. But there is ample room for a few congenial spirits, and towards these I would not be selfish.

In truth the unequivocal warmth of the valleys of the southern Alps in August, the English travelling season, will serve to check the incursions of cockneydom; for the modern British tourist professes himself incapable of enjoying life, much less exercise, under even a moderate degree of heat. Everybody knows how the three warm days which make up an English summer are received with more groans than gratitude, and the thunderstorm which invariably ends them is saluted by a chorus of thanksgiving adequate for a delivery from some Egyptian plague. The sun so dreaded at home we naturally shun abroad. Italy and the Levant are already deserted at the season when they become most enjoyable. An Italian valley suggests to the too solid Englishman not the glorious glow of summer and a profusion of 'purple

grapes, green figs, and mulberries,' but fever, cholera, and sundry kinds of dissolution.

Lago Maggiore is a name well known to thousands, but I doubt whether, even in the Alpine Club, ten could be found ready to point out off-hand the whereabouts of Val Maggia. Yet the valley offers a type of beauty as rare and worth knowing as the lake into which its waters flow.[1]

Behind Locarno, at the head of Lago Maggiore, is the outlet of a network of valleys, forming the veins of the mountain mass, Italian by nature, though Swiss by circumstance, which divides the Gries and the St. Gothard. The longest and deepest of these valleys is that of the Maggia. Yet, despite its length, it leads to no pass over the main Alpine chain. The gaps at its head open only on the high pasturages of Val Bedretto. It has been thus cut off by nature from any share in the traffic which has flowed for centuries on one or the other side of it.

I must now ask the reader to imagine himself seated beside me on the box of the country omnibus which plies daily through this valley. Some three miles from Locarno in the picturesque defile of Ponte Brolla our eyes, accustomed to the murky grey of most glacier streams, are first greeted by the marvellous waters of the Maggia, shining with intensity of blue out of deep caves and hollows in the heart of the smooth white granite. But for many miles to come the scenery of Val Maggia does not rise above the ordinary boldness of a granite district, here graced by a slender cascade, there marred by a stony waste.

[1] I have not succeeded in discovering any connection between the word, Maggia and Maggiore.

About sixteen miles, or three hours, from Locarno the road crosses for the first time to the right bank of the stream, and passes through Cevio, the political centre of the neighbouring valleys, standing on the confines of the three districts of Val Maggia, Val Lavizzara and Val Rovana. We drive across an open space, like an English village green, surrounded by houses more pretentious than are commonly seen in the mountains.

It was on this spot that De Saussure, while taking an observation to ascertain the height of the place above the sea, was greeted and invited to enter by the baillie or chief magistrate of the valley. I cannot resist quoting the amusing account of the interview which followed.

'It being some time,' writes De Saussure, 'since I had had any news from the civilized world, I accepted the invitation, hoping to learn some. What was my surprise when the baillie told me that though it was long since he had had any letter from the other side of the Alps, he should be happy to give an answer to any inquiry I might wish to make. At the same time he showed me an old black seal, and this was the oracle which answered all his questions. He held in his hand a string, to the end of which this seal was attached, and he dangled the seal thus fastened in the centre of a drinking-glass. Little by little the trembling of the hand communicated to the thread and seal a motion which made the latter strike against the sides of the glass. The number of these blows indicated the answer to the question which the person who held the string had in his mind. He assured me with the seriousness of profound conviction that he knew by this means not only everything that was going on at home, but also

the elections for the Council of Bale and the number of votes each candidate had obtained. He questioned me on the object of my travels, and after having learnt it, showed me on his almanac the age which common chronology gives the world, and asked me what I thought about it. I told him that my observations of mountains had led me to look on the world as somewhat older. "Ah," he answered with an air of triumph, "my seal had already told me so, because the other day I had the patience to count the blows while reflecting on the world's age, and I found it was four years older than it is set down in this almanac." '

Near Cevio the landscape takes a more romantic character. The valley-walls close in and bend, and huge knobs of ruddy-grey rock thrust themselves forward. The river, confined to a narrow bed, alternately lies still in pools, whose depth of blue no comparison can express, or rushes off over the white boulders in a clear sparkling dance. Chestnut-trees hang from the crags overhead; higher on the hills every ledge is a stripe of verdure fringed with the delicate shapes of the birch and larch. In the far distance a snow-peak in the range above Val Leventina gleams behind the folds of the nearer mountains.

But up to the last moment nothing foreshadows the wonderful surprise in store. As we draw near the first scattered houses of Bignasco, the mountains suddenly break open, and reveal a vision of the most exquisite and harmonious beauty, one of those master-pieces of nature which defy the efforts of the subtlest word-painters, and are perhaps best left alone by a dull topographer. Yet I cannot refrain, useless as the effort may be, from at least cataloguing some of the details which come to-

gether in this noble landscape. The waters at our feet are transparent depths of a colour, half sapphire and half emerald, indescribable, and, the moment the eye is taken away, inconceivable, so that every glance becomes a fresh surprise. In the foreground on either bank of the stream are frescoed walls and mossy house-roofs; beyond is a summerhouse supported by pillars, and a heavily laden peach-orchard lit with a blaze of sunflowers. At the gate of Val Bavona a white village glistens from amidst its vineyards. Sheer above it two bold granite walls rise out of the verdure, and form the entrance to a long avenue of great mountain shapes. Behind these foremost masses the hills fall valleywards in noble and perfectly harmonious lines. Each upper cliff flows down into a slope of chestnut-muffled boulders in a curve, the classical beauty of which is repeated by the vine-tendrils at its feet. In the distance the snows of the Basodine seen through the sunny haze gleam, like a golden halo, on the far-off head of the mountain.

Is human interest wanted to give completeness and a motive to the picture? As daylight faded I have watched the swinging torches and low chaunt of those who carried the Host to some passing soul. In the morning-glow I have seen a white-robed procession pour slowly with banners and noise of bells from the yet dark village, then suddenly issuing into the sunshine, surge, a living wave of brightness, over the high-arched bridges.

Bignasco lives in my memory as one of the loveliest spots in the Italian Alps. Planted at the meeting-place of three valleys, the view up Val Bavona is only the fairest of the fair scenes which surround it. In every

direction paths strike off through the woods. Across the river rises a bold bluff of rock; behind it the hill-side curves in, and forms an ample bay filled with chestnut forest; at intervals a sunny spot has been cleared and planted as a vineyard, the unstubbed ground is covered by a carpet of Alpine rhododendron, here tempted down to its lowest limit in the chain.[1] Little tracks, wandering in alternate 'forthrights and meanders' from one haybarn to another, lead at last to a white chapel placed on a conspicuous brow. By its side stands an older and humbler edifice. The gates of both are bolted, but the bolt is held fast only by a withered nosegay, and it is easy to make an entrance into the smaller chapel and examine its frescoes. They have been atrociously daubed over; but the pattern of the child's dress in the central picture, and a certain strength in the figures and faces on the side walls, still bear witness to a time when the great wave of Italian art spread even into Val Maggia. A date in the first twenty years of the sixteenth century may be read above the altar.

We are here on the verge of the chestnuts; a few hundred feet above us the woods change into beech and ash groves; higher still birch and larch feather the mountain spurs. The valleys meet at our feet. On the left, sloping lawns fall away abruptly into a deep torrent-worn ravine; far beneath are the white houses of Cevio. Val Bavona with its mountain curves and crowning snows lies immediately opposite.

Why, we ask, as we sit on the chapel steps, does this combination of rocks and trees touch our senses with so rare and subtle a pleasure? On the lakes we

[1] Bignasco is only 1,400 feet above the sea.

have left landscapes more 'softly sublime, profusely fair.' But those belonged to the class of hill-scenery; even the waving crests were to their tops clothed in green and the whole landscape pleased and contented us by its aspect of unbroken domestic repose and richness. Here the bold dark outlines of the granite precipices hanging over the luxuriant yet untamed loveliness of the valley appeal to our emotions with the strong power of contrast. The majesty of the central ranges wedded to the beauty of Italy excites in us that enthusiasm beyond tranquil admiration which is our tribute to the highest expression of the Romantic whether in Art or Nature. We can contemplate calmly a rich lake-scene or an Umbrian Madonna; we feel disposed to cry out with delight before a figure of Michael Angelo or this view in Val Maggia.

For in this valley the strength of granite is clothed in the grace of southern foliage, in a rich mantle of chestnuts and beeches, fringed with maize and vines, and embroidered about the skirts with delicate traceries of ferns and cyclamen. Nature seems here to have hit the mark she so often misses—to speak boldly but truly—in her higher efforts: she has avoided alike the trough-like uniformity which renders hideous much of the upper Engadine and diminishes even the splendours of Chamonix, the naked sternness of Mattmark or the Grimsel, the rough scales of muddy moraine and torrent-spread ruin which deface Monte Rosa herself, where she sinks towards Macugnaga and Italy.

It is easy to return more directly down the face of the rocks. In these valleys the industry of centuries, by building up stone staircases from shelf to shelf, has made paths in the least likely spots. Even the

narrowest ledge between two cliffs is turned to profit. Across the bridge behind the inn rises an abrupt crag, up the face of which a dwarf wall runs at a very high angle. This wall, at first sight purposeless, proved to be in fact a stone ladder, the flakes of gneiss which projected along its top serving as steps for the active peasantry. The ascent to some of the alps lies up stone staircases, three hours—to measure distance in the local manner—in length. To these the wiry little cows of Canton Ticino speedily accustom themselves. Indeed, so expert do they become in getting up stairs that the broad flights of steps leading to the church doors have to be barricaded by posts placed at narrow intervals to prevent the parting herd from yielding to a sudden impulse to join in a body in morning mass, or a stray cow from wandering in unawares to browse on the tinsel vegetation of the high altar.

The greater part of the population of Bignasco cluster closely under the hillside, where a long dull village street squeezed in between two rows of stone walls opens out here and there into a tiny square or 'piazzetta,' with a stone bench and a stone fountain overshadowed by a stone-propped vine. These houses resemble in nothing those of a Swiss hamlet. The abandonment of the use of wood in favour of an equally handy and more solid material, joined to something in the external construction of the houses, carried my thoughts, on our last visit, far away to the stone towns of central Syria. Here, as there, I noted that the principal entrance to each tenement was by a gateway eight to ten feet high, and proportionately broad. Remembering how in my youth I had been taken to task by a worthy

missionary for not recognising in such doors the work of giants, I enquired eagerly for traditions of some local Og, perhaps a link between the giant of the Mettenberg and the present Swiss. But such was the ignorance of the country folk that I could obtain no further answer than that the gateways were a convenient size for a laden mule.

The well-to-do people of Val Maggia seem to be sensible of the charms of the spot where the waters of Val Bavona and the main valley meet.

On the promontory between the two rivers, each crossed just above the junction by a bold arch, stands a suburb of what would be described by an auctioneer as 'detached villas,' houses gay with painted shutters and arched loggias, where grapes cluster and oleanders flush. One of these, commanding from its upper windows the perfect view up Val Bavona, is the 'Posta,' the home of Signor Patocchi, who entertains the rare strangers who visit the village. Our host is a man of high standing and substance in his own country. For three generations the office of President of the United Districts of Val Maggia has remained in his family. He has represented Ticino on public occasions and is a member of the Cantonal Council and of the Swiss Alpine Club. The energy of the race is represented also by a vivacious active sister who dwells with family pride on her brother's successes in life, and most of all on a bridge for the new St. Gothard railway, for which he had accepted the contract; a 'cosa stupenda,' a 'vera opera Romana.'

The example of their foregoers has assuredly not been lost on the modern Italians. Not only in great works such as the Mont Cenis tunnel or the coast railway

from Nice to Spezzia, but also in the country roads of remote valleys the traveller finds frequent evidences of the survival of the Roman tradition and genius for road-making. The industry and skill displayed in opening and improving means of communication by the most obscure communes—frequently, it is true, when they expend themselves in the laborious construction of pavés, misdirected—contrast very favourably with the sloth in the same matter of many northern 'Boards' apt to pride themselves on their energy.

Sometimes, however, this inherited zeal outruns discretion, witness the following story taken from a local newspaper. Caspoggio is a hamlet perched high on a green hillside in Val Malenco, at the back of the Bernina. The lower communes had in 1874 just completed a new road to which Caspoggio naturally desired to link itself. There were two ways of effecting this, one estimated to cost 40,000 lire (£1,600), the other 15,000 (£600); the cheapest road was, however, twenty-two minutes the longer. The bold patriarchs of Caspoggio were all for saving time as against money. Whereon the 'Corriere Valtellinese' solemnly protested against the intended extravagance, and pointed out its inconsistency with the facts that the annual income of the commune was not more than £80 a year, and that it could only afford its schoolmaster and mistress annual pittances of £6 apiece. 'My good sirs of Caspoggio,' said this sensible adviser, 'is it worth while to create a communal debt in order to bring your butter and cheese a few minutes earlier to market?' How Caspoggio decided I have yet to learn.

To return to Val Maggia and its President. Signor Patocchi is a man of position among his neighbours,

and his house shows it. But he is also a Southerner, and his floors show it. Having confessed this, however, the worst is said, and for the rest English people accustomed to travel will find little to complain of. The beds are clean, fish and fowl the neighbourhood supplies, and a few hours' notice will collect ample provisions for the carnivorous climber.

But it is time for us to leave Bignasco and follow the road up the main valley henceforth known as Val Lavizzara.

For four or five miles we mount through a picturesque ravine, where the mountains rise in rugged walls tier above tier overhead. Yet every cranny is filled with glossy foliage, and the intervening ledges are no monstrous deformities, only fit to be 'left to slope,' but each a meadow closely mown, and dotted with stone haybarns. If some gash is noticed in the cliffs it is only as a brighter streak of colour; the ruin wrought below has long been buried out of sight, cottages grow against the fallen rocks, and vines fling themselves over their roughnesses. The river, no murky grey monster—like those fitly transformed into dragons by the legends of the northern Alps—runs through a narrow cleft, in the depths of which we catch alternate glimpses of deep blue pools or creamlike falls.

A little farther the defile opens, the stream flows more peaceably, and we shall see fishermen armed with huge jointless rods strolling along its banks. Though still early morning, some are already returning, amongst them a curé with a well-filled basket for his Friday dinner.

Several clusters of houses hang on the hillside, but the first village is Broglio, shaded by groves of gigantic

walnuts; a mile beyond the valley bends, the shoulders of the hills sink sufficiently to allow their rugged heads to come into view, and a glen opens on the right backed by the jagged snow-streaked range of the Campo Tencca. The first sunbeams which have reached us stream through the gap, and bathe the forest in a golden flood of light. A great pulpit-shaped boulder rises beside the road, and is seized on as a post by the telegraph wire. Soon after we cross the stream and enter two adjoining villages. Beyond them is a small cemetery, decorated with paintings in somewhat better taste than those usually found in the mountains. There is further evidence of culture in the couplet from Dante, which under one of the frescoes takes the place of the usual Latin text.

Amidst a rocky waste, where the torrent from Val Peccia joins the larger stream, stands the dirty hamlet of Peccia. The glen to which it gives a name seems here the true head of the valley, but the entrance to the longest branch is by a steep ascent up the right-hand hillside. Above the first level, a grassy dell occupied by some saw-mills, the river has cut its way through a rock-barrier. Here on my first visit the air resounded with the hammering and sawing of a large company of labourers, some clinging on the rocks and boring, others wheeling away the rubbish, whilst another party were building up the piers of a lofty bridge. The excellent and boldly engineered road then in construction is now completed, and leads as far as Fusio.

We are now at the limit of the romantic Italian valley, and are leaving behind us not only the vine and the chestnut, but also the granite. The mountains as

we approach them seem to sink before us. The precipices of the lower valley give place to smooth lawns shadowed by spreading beeches. The gentle hillsides which surround the headwaters of the Maggia rise up into low rounded crests, and the scenery is only redeemed from monotony by the rich variety of the foliage and verdure.

The highest village, Fusio, is a cluster of houses crowded round a church, and clinging to a steep slope, at the foot of which flows the blue torrent in a deep bridge-spanned cleft. The inn ten years ago was of the most primitive kind. It was kept by a worthy couple whose shrewd puckered faces recalled some portrait of an early German master. But they were as lively as they were old, and no emergency, not even the arrival of three hungry Englishmen, found them without resources. On the occasion in question they boldly proceeded to sacrilege on our behalf. The village knew that the curé was going to have a fowl for dinner; the good dame hurried off to the parsonage, and like David robbed the tables of the priest.

The old inn and its owners are no longer to be found. A new hotel has lately been built, and is said to be frequented by Italians seeking refuge from the summer heat of the Lombard plain.

Thus far we have simply followed the main valley. Of its numerous tributary glens, Val Bavona and Val di Prato are the most likely to be visited by mountaineers, for they lead to the two highest summits of the neighbouring ranges, the Basodine and Piz Campo Tencca. But their beauties ought to attract others besides those who may wish to use them as means to a higher end—in a literal and Alpine Club sense.

The finest entrance to Val Maggia is through Val Bavona. The traveller descending from the cold heights and bleak pasturages of the Gries finds a warm welcome from the storm in the little inn opened some years ago on the very edge of the cliff over which the Tosa rushes in the most imposing cataract of the central Alps.[1] An afternoon is well spent in resting on the rocks beside the tearing, foaming flood, and watching the endless variety of the forms taken by the broken waves in their wild downward rush. Waterfalls are too seldom studied at leisure. Such a view is far more impressive than the hurried glance ordinarily taken from some point whence the cascade is seen in face, and all detail is sacrificed to a general effect, which often fails to be either imposing or picturesque.

The host of the inn will with pleasure undertake to place you next morning in from three to four hours on the top of the Basodine. The ascent is simple, and not at all tedious; a steep path up a moist flower-sprinkled cliff, rolling alps commanding views of the red mountains of the Gries, then steep banks of frozen snow, and a short exciting scramble up the highest rocks.

The mountain is a natural belvidere for the Bernese Oberland and Monte Rosa, and rising a good head above its fellows, must give a glorious view towards Italy. But to me the mountains of Val Maggia are unfriendly. Here as on Piz Campo Tencca I saw only a stoneman and a world of seething mists.

The night before our ascent had been black and

[1] The falls of Krimml in Tyrol are probably on the whole the Alpine cataract in which height of fall, force of water, and picturesque surroundings are most thoroughly united. There are many falls in the Adamello group which a painter wonld prefer to the cascade of the Tosa.

wild. The wind had roared against the waterfall, and the thunder had rocked the house as though it had a mind to shake it bodily over the cliff. But the grey sad sunrise was not without hope; the scarves of mist which still clung about the mountains seemed remnants of an outworn grief; the upper sky, pale and tremulous, rather spoke of a storm past than threatened further ills to come. But the crisis had been more violent than we dreamt at the time, and twenty-four hours of reparation were needed before the face of heaven could again shine in its full summer fairness.

The loss of the view was not our only disappointment. It had been determined to find a new and more direct way down to San Carlo through Val Antabbia. But in a blind fog it is best to avoid precipices, and we knew there were plenty in that direction, so we quietly returned to the gap between our peak and the Kastelhorn, and put on the rope preparatory to descending the Cavergno Glacier.

The slopes of snow, cut here and there by deep rifts, offered easy passage until hardening into blue ice they curled over steeply. Some rocks stuck out on our left, and at their base, at a depth of several hundred feet, abysses innumerable gaped through the mists. This was an unexpected difficulty, and we should have been perplexed what to do had not the wind slightly shifted the cloud-curtain, and shown enough to enable us to understand our exact position.

The glacier is divided into two terraces by a wall of rock, which towards the base of the Kastelhorn is covered over by an icefall, passable no doubt with ease near that peak. We had descended too directly, and were to the right, or south, of the fall. We must

either remount and go round, or else get down the rocks. With a little trouble we found a passage, and François, boldly taking advantage of a narrow bridge between two ice-pits, led us safely on to the lower branch of the glacier.

Its surface was broken only by contemptible crevices, and we ran down without interruption to the huge terminal moraine. Sitting amongst its blocks, we looked back at the great shining slope, on which the sun was already shining. High up under the Basodine long shadows fell from an isolated group of snow-towers or 'séracs,' amongst the most prodigious I had seen in the Alps; a glacier Karnac of ponderous columns and huge propylons. The smoothness of the surrounding ice, like the flatness of the Egyptian plain, added to the effect of this mountain temple.

We wished we had missed our way a little more and passed through its midst. Had we done so we might have followed out the upper or southern branch of the glacier, and found our way into the glen below the meeting of waterfalls afterwards mentioned. Close to the ice, in a sheltered basin, spread with a carpet of verdure, and watered by a smooth-flowing stream, we found the highest châlets. Great was our surprise when our eager enquiries for milk were answered in broken English. The herdsman had worked as a miner in Cornwall, and had now returned in good circumstances to his native valley.

The narrowness of their granite walls drives the Val Maggians far afield in search of subsistence.[1] A wayside

[1] Between the years 1850–56, one-eighth of the whole population, and one-fourth of the male population, left their homes. Amongst the emigrants were 324 married men, only two of whom took their wives with them!

chapel in Val Bavona has been recently erected, as its inscription narrates, with Australian gold, and the driver of the Locarno omnibus in 1873 had learnt English in the Antipodes. Most of these wanderers come back, some rich, to build large, white, cheerful houses—'palazzi' their friends call them—amongst the familiar chestnut-groves; others, like our friend, less successful, but still not wholly unrewarded, to revert contentedly to the old solitary life on the hills with the cows and goats. There can be no stronger proof of the real fascination of mountains over minds which have grown amongst them than the fidelity of these peasants, who hurry back from all the excitements of the Antipodes to the monotony of the alp in summer and the hamlet in winter.[1]

Beyond the huts, path and stream make a sudden plunge into a deep hollow, the meeting-place of the waters which, springing from the tarns and snows that lie on the upper shelves, rush over the granite precipices in a succession of noble falls. The shadeless glen is closed at its lower end by a buttress projecting from the eastern mountain. On climbing the spur we saw deep below us a trough-like valley. Steep mountains encircled the basin, and its floor was strewn with huge masses torn from their rugged sides. High overhead rose the southern bulwarks of the Basodine, gigantic cliffs, on whose topmost verge sparkled a glittering ice-cornice. At our feet San Carlo, the highest village in Val Bavona, peeped out from amidst

[1] The herdsmen of these châlets have a way to the Val Formazza without crossing the Basodine. The 'Bocchetta di Val Maggia,' a gap in the rocky ridge at the north-eastern corner of the Cavergno glacier, brings them on to the pasturages near the San Giacomo Pass, whence either Airolo or the Tosa Falls can be gained without further ascent.

rich foliage. Many women were scattered over the meadows, cutting and gathering in their hay; and, as we rested, a boy came up from them, and told us that to reach the valley we must return and cross the stream. A rough path on the right bank led us through beautiful copses, where the beech and birch mingled their branches with the pines, and tall ferns and bright-berried bushes wove a luxuriant undergrowth. Chestnuts and walnuts greeted us for the first time as we approached the high-arched bridge leading to San Carlo.

The path, now a good cart-track carried on a causeway between purple boulders and gnarled old chestnuts, passed by the way a brightly coloured chapel and two villages. Near the second, a cluster of poor huts hemmed in by enormous blocks of granite, a pretty jet of water shoots out of the western cliff, the valley bends, and the sunlit mountains behind Bignasco close the distance.

A short plain, ruined by a torrent which has recently carried away half a hamlet, is now passed. To such disasters Val Bavona is always exposed, and a law formerly forbad any one to live in it through the winter.

Henceforth, keeping beside the clear blue waters, we descended with them, through a tangle of white stream-smoothed boulders, and under the shadow of the prodigious cliffs from which they have fallen. One of the blocks bears this simple record: 'Qui fu bella Campagna,' and the date 1594. Yet despite the ruin and destruction of which the defile, within an even historically modern epoch, has been the scene, its beauty is in no way of a stern or savage nature. If the mountain shapes are as majestical as those of Giotto's Duomo,

their walls are also decorated with the most lavish hand; and even where the granite is bare time and weather have tinted it with the mellow hues of an old Florentine façade.

No more typical passage from the Alps to Italy can possibly be found than that we had chosen. A few hours ago we had been in the frigid zone among the eternal snows, and above the level of all but the hardiest plants. Now the green pastures and the pines were already past, the chestnut had become our companion, and the first vine threw its long branches over the rude woodwork of a sheltered hut. Soon three or four were found in company under the sunny side of a heat-reflecting rock, until as we drew near Cavergno the whole slope became a vine-yard, and the path an overarched alley between a double row of tall granite pillars, from which the ripe clusters hung down into our faces in too tempting luxuriance.

A straight line drawn from Faido, on the St. Gothard road, to Bignasco nearly passes through Piz Campo Tencca, the three-domed snow-crest which dominates the eastern range, and, like its loftier rival, the Basodine, peers down on that charming halting-place. The pass between the two highest of these summits was, therefore, clearly the proper path for two mountaineers coming from the east to Val Maggia.

To the driving public Faido is known for an excellent inn and a waterfall, the latter the outflow of the glacier we proposed to cross. A much-used track climbs in a long zigzag to the cultivated tableland which lies above the steep slope overshadowing the village. Beyond the large upland hamlet of Dalpe, our path pursued the stream into the hills, mounting steeply by its side to an

upper plain, whence several tracks, some for goats and some for cows, led over broken ground to the Crozlina Alp, a broad pasturage at the base of a wall of rocks, over which the streams falling from the upper glaciers shiver themselves into spray. A few yards south of a boldly projecting crag, and by the side of one of the cascades, we found it easy to scramble up the broken rock-faces until the level of the ice was reached; then it seemed best to bear to the right, and follow a long ridge connecting the buttress and the highest peak.

The morning had been uncertain, and now the clouds, which we had hoped were only local and passing, fell upon us with a determination which promised little chance of deliverance.

What is the duty of a traveller and his guides overtaken on the mountains by bad weather is a question which the sad death on the Mer de Glace brought not long ago prominently before the public, and which will be argued as often as some fatal accident calls attention to the subject. It is one which does not admit of any offhand answer. Climbers are of various constitutions, there are mountains and mountains, and divers kinds of bad weather. Still it may be useful to endeavour to lay down such leading principles as will probably meet with general consent.

Where the travellers are new to high mountains, and uncertain of their own powers of endurance, the guide, in every case where going on involves long exposure to storm, should suggest, and his employers agree to, a retreat. The moral courage necessary for this is one of the requisites of a guide's calling; and if by its exercise he may sometimes expose himself to the hasty ridicule of an ignorant tourist, he will not

suffer in his profession or in the estimation of real climbers.

Again, an attempt on one of the more difficult peaks, such as the Schreckhorn or the Weisshorn, ought not to be persevered with in doubtful weather; that is, by perseverance in such a case the risk to life becomes so serious that, whatever the travellers' own value of themselves may be, they have no right to ask guides to share it. For it should always be remembered that it is where difficulties prevent rapid movement that the bitter cold grasps its victim. Except, perhaps, in the very worst, and fortunately rare, *tourmentes* circulation can always be maintained by constant motion.

Thirdly, exposure to this worst kind of storm, which comes on with an insupportable icy blast, should be as far as possible shunned even on a mule-pass. The simple monuments which line the track of the Col de Bonhomme and the Gavia Pass, near Santa Catarina, bear witness to the dangers of such weather, even on a comparatively frequented route.

There remain, however, a large class of cases where more or less seasoned climbers are overtaken by clouds, rain, or snow, in each of which the decision must depend on the circumstances, and for which no general rule can be laid down. A wet day in the valley is often far from intolerable above the snow-level, where the gently falling flakes sink slowly through an air of moderate temperature. In such weather many high passes may be safely accomplished by men of sufficient experience, who understand how to apply their local knowledge, or to use a good map and compass.

Of course, it will be asked, *Cui bono*?—why wander amidst the mists when you might be comfortable below

them? The answer is, that when the day changes the traveller is often far on his way. It is a case, perhaps, of going back four hours or going on five; there is, besides the natural disinclination to return and to have had one's walk for nothing, the hope, often justified, that the change for the worse may be only temporary. These are motives which must strongly influence everyone in such a position.

Besides, the inside of a cloud is not quite so dismal a place as might be thought, and the snow-region, even when the distant view is hidden, offers attractions for those who have learnt to appreciate it. The fretted ice-chasms, the toppling towers and fragile arches of the upper glacier, the keen white pyramid seen suddenly through a wreath of mist, or the snow-wave caught in the act of breaking over the highest crest, have a loveliness of their own as delicate as, and from its strangeness to inhabitants of a temperate zone sometimes even more fascinating than, the charm of streams and forests. It is not, it is true, visible to all eyes. A Reverend Principal lately instructed his audience that 'a more hideous spectacle than a yawning crevasse, with its cold, blue, glassy sides, can scarcely be conceived.' But Mons. Loppé and the Alpine Club know better than this. Most of us can probably remember, in the Regent's Park Colosseum, a sham Switzerland: what that in a sorry enough way attempted to be to the reality, the reality is to the Polar regions—a specimen near home of Arctic scenery. Much of this beauty can be seen even in a partial fog. But there is also the chance of that most glorious of transfigurations of earth and sky, when towards evening some breath of air sweeps away the local storm, and through the melt-

ing cloud-wreaths we see the wide landscape glittering with fresh rain, and the new snows shining opposite the setting sun—a scene the full splendour of which can scarcely be recalled even in the memory of those who have often witnessed it.

In the present instance two hours would, we knew, put us well on the other side of the mountain, where our friends were waiting for us; and, though neither my guide nor I knew anything of the ground, we could trust to General Dufour's map. The Swiss traveller has here an enormous advantage over his brother in Great Britain. If anyone is rash enough, in Wales for instance, to put his faith in the English Ordnance Survey, and to seek a passage where light shading seems to indicate an absence of precipices, he will soon find himself brought to a standstill. The present state of our national maps is far from creditable to our Government and our engineers.

For the moment all we had to do was to stick to the ridge, which must and did lead us straight to the stone-man, in such weather the only indication of the summit. A short halt for the chance of a break in the clouds and to settle clearly our route on the map, and we started on the unknown descent. The first point was to strike the gap south of the peak. A few minutes sufficed for this, then we had only to descend with a constant bearing to the left. The ground was steep and rough, and there were cliffs in every direction, but we managed to avoid them. In half an hour we had reached the lower skirts of the cloud, and passed out of gentle snow into pitiless rain.

Cattle tracks now led us past the highest huts to a cabin from the chimney of which smoke issued. The

solitary herdsman welcomed us with a courtesy and coffee worthy of an Eastern sheikh. The pouring rain, perhaps, flavoured the beverage, but François Devouassoud and I both fancied that, west of Constantinople, we had never tasted so aromatic a draught.

The head of the valley seemed to be a basin surrounded on all sides by rugged cliffs; in the present weather it was nothing but a caldron of mist. How should we escape from it? The hill-shoulders pressed us in on all sides; yet the shepherd promised a *strada buona*. In a quarter of an hour we were at the meeting-place of the mountain-torrents, where from their union sprang a stream, the bluest of all the blue waters of Val Maggia, full of a life now bright and dashing, now calm and deep, such as might fitly be personified in a Naiad. This was the fairy who would unbar the gates of our prison. We followed the guidance of the waters into the jaws of the mountain, where they had seized on some flaw or fissure to work for themselves a passage. But the stream had thought only for itself. No room was provided for a path, and the ingenuity of a road-making population had evidently been taxed to the utmost to render the ravine passable for cows as well as water. A causeway was built up on every natural shelf, and, where the level could no longer be kept, the hanging terraces were connected by regularly-built stone staircases. A rough balustrade formed a protection on the outside, and prevented a hasty plunge into the gulf, where the brilliant waters wrestled with the stiff crags which every now and then thrust out a knee to stop their flow, and gave them a tumble from which they collected themselves at leisure in a deep still pool before dancing off again to fresh

struggles and fresh victories. From the shelves above the bright-berried mountain ash and delicate birch stretched out their arms to the stream, which, as if impatient for the vines, hurried past them and at last broke away with a bold leap, flying down over the rock-faces to the lower valley in a shower of foam and water-rockets.

Near the junction of a glen through which the track of the Passo di Redorta climbs over to Val Verzasca, a steep descent beside the fall leads to the hamlet of San Carlo. The path here crosses a bridge and keeps henceforth along a broken, richly wooded hill-side until, having swerved to the right, it joins at Prato the main valley.

And so down the moist high-road under the dripping walnuts of Broglio, and again, after ten years, back to Bignasco, beautiful even under the grey cloud-pall with its hill-shapes only suggested between the mists. Most beautiful when with the sunset a northern breeze gathered up the vapour-wreaths and a full moon shone down into Val Bavona marking with clearest lights and shadows all its buttresses, and drawing a responsive gleam from the pure snows at its head. A change too sudden to last. For while sitting on the bridge we watched the moonbeams strike over the southward hill, and fall full on the eddying water at our feet and the flowery balconies on either hand, a white drapery stretched slowly round the Cevio corner, and, as in the immortal Chorus of Aristophanes, a gleaming company of clouds sailed up on their way from the deep hollows of the lake to the wood-crowned heights of the mountain. The leader advanced but slowly with misty folds clinging to each crag; but it had scarcely passed when the

whole body was upon us, and the bright upper heaven was obscured by their fleecy forms.

After midnight we were awakened by the rush of mountain rain and the crash of thunder, while in the white blaze we saw the Maggia blue no longer, but turbid with the grey granite atoms which it was hurrying down to swell the delta of Locarno. The storm spirits were in earnest, and in the morning every cliff had its cascade, bridges had been swept away, and great heaps of mud and stones, washed out of the overhanging crags, blocked even the high-road which offers the only escape from the mountain world.