A VISIT TO THE CIMBRI.

I HAD often heard in Venice of that ancient people, settled in the Alpine hills about the pretty town of Bassano, on the Brenta, whom common fame declares to be a remnant of the Cimbrian invaders of Rome, broken up in battle, and dispersed along the borders of North Italy, by Marius, many centuries ago. So when the soft September weather came, last year, we sallied out of Venice, in three, to make conquest of whatever was curious in the life and traditions of these mountaineers, who dwell in seven villages, and are therefore called the people of the Sette Communi among their Italian neighbors. We went fully armed with note-book and sketch-book, and prepared to take literary possession of our conquest.

From Venice to the city of Vicenza by railroad, it is two hours; and thence one must take a carriage to Bassano (which is an opulent and busy little grain mart, of some twelve thousand souls, about thirty miles north of Venice). We were very glad of the ride across the country. By the time we reached the town it was nine o'clock, and moonlight, and as we glanced out of our windows we saw the quaint up-and-down-hill streets peopled with promenaders,

and every body in Bassano seemed to be making love. Young girls strolled about the picturesque ways with their lovers, and tender couples were cooing at the doorways and windows, and the scene had all that surface of romance with which the Italians contrive to varnish the real commonplaceness of their life. Our ride through the twilight landscape had prepared us for the sentiment of Bassano; we had pleased ourselves with the spectacle of the peasants returning from their labor in the fields, led in troops of eight or ten by stalwart, white-teethed, bare-legged maids; and we had reveled in the momentary lordship of an old walled town we passed, which at dusk seemed more Gothic and Middle-Age than any thing after Verona, with a fine church, and turrets and battlements in great plenty. What town it was, or what it had been doing there so many ages, I have never sought to know, and I should be sorry to learn any thing about it.

The next morning we began those researches for preliminary information concerning the Cimbri which turned out so vain. Indeed, as we drew near the lurking-places of that ancient people, all knowledge relating to them diffused itself into shadowy conjecture. The barber and the bookseller differed as to the best means of getting to the Sette Communi, and the *caffetiere* at whose place we took breakfast knew nothing at all of the road, except that it was up the mountains, and commanded views of scenery which, verily, it would not grieve us to see. As to the Cimbri, he only knew that they had their own lan-

guage, which was yet harder than the German. The German was hard enough, but the Cimbrian! *Corpo!*

At last, hearing of a famous cave there is at Oliero, a town some miles further up the Brenta, we determined to go there, and it was a fortunate thought, for there we found a nobleman in charge of the cave who told us exactly how to reach the Sette Communi. You pass a bridge to get out of Bassano — a bridge which spans the crystal swiftness of the Brenta, rushing down to the Adriatic from the feet of the Alps on the north, and full of voluble mills at Bassano. All along the road to Oliero was the finest mountain scenery, Brenta-washed, and picturesque with ever-changing lines. Maize grows in the bottom-lands, and tobacco, which is guarded in the fields by soldiers for the monopolist government. Farm-houses dot the valley, and now and then we passed villages, abounding in blonde girls, so rare elsewhere in Italy, but here so numerous as to give Titian that type from which he painted.

At Oliero we learned not only which was the road to the Sette Communi, but that we were in it, and it was settled that we should come the next day and continue in it, with the custodian of the cave, who for his breakfast and dinner, and what else we pleased, offered to accompany us. We were early at Oliero on the following morning, and found our friend in waiting; he mounted beside our driver, and we rode up the Brenta to the town of Valstagna where our journey by wheels ended, and where we

were to take mules for the mountain ascent. Our guide, Count Giovanni Bonato (for I may as well give him his title, though at this stage of our progress we did not know into what patrician care we had fallen), had already told us what the charge for mules would be, but it was necessary to go through the ceremony of bargain with the muleteer before taking the beasts. Their owner was a Cimbrian, with a broad sheepish face, and a heavy, awkward accent of Italian which at once more marked his northern race, and made us feel comparatively secure from plunder in his hands. He had come down from the mountain top the night before, bringing three mules laden with charcoal, and he had waited for us till the morning. His beasts were furnished with comfortable pads, covered with linen, to ride upon, and with halters instead of bridles, and we were prayed to let them have their heads in the ascent, and not to try to guide them.

The elegant leisure of Valstagna (and in an Italian town nearly the whole population is elegantly at leisure) turned out to witness the departure of our expedition; the pretty little blonde wife of our innkeeper, who was to get dinner ready against our return, held up her baby to wish us *boun viaggio*, and waved us adieu with the infant as with a handkerchief; the chickens and children scattered to right and left before our advance; and with Count Giovanni going splendidly ahead on foot, and the Cimbrian bringing up the rear, we struck on the broad rocky valley between the heights, and presently

began the ascent. It was a lovely morning; the sun was on the heads of the hills, and the shadows clothed them like robes to their feet; and I should be glad to feel here and now the sweetness, freshness, and purity of the mountain air, that seemed to bathe our souls in a childlike delight of life. A noisy brook gurgled through the valley; the birds sang from the trees; the Alps rose, crest on crest, around us; and soft before us, among the bald peaks showed the wooded height where the Cimbrian village of Fozza stood, with a white chapel gleaming from the heart of the lofty grove. Along the mountain sides the smoke curled from the lonely huts of shepherds, and now and then we came upon one of those melancholy refuges which are built in the hills for such travelers as are belated in their ways, or are overtaken there by storms.

The road for the most part winds by the brink of precipices, — walled in with masonry of small stones, where Nature has not shored it up with vast monoliths, — and is paved with limestone. It is, of course, merely a mule-path, and it was curious to see, and thrilling to experience, how the mules, vain of the safety of their foothold, kept as near the border of the precipices as possible. For my own part, I abandoned to my beast the entire responsibility involved by this line of conduct; let the halter hang loose upon his neck, and gave him no aid except such slight service as was occasionally to be rendered by shutting my eyes and holding my breath. The mule of the fairer traveler behind me was not only ambi-

tious of peril like my own, but was envious of my beast's captaincy, and continually tried to pass him on the outside of the path, to the great dismay of the gentle rider; while half-suppressed wails of terror from the second lady in the train gave evidence of equal vanity and daring in her mule. Count Giovanni strode stolidly before, the Cimbrian came behind, and we had little coherent conversation until we stopped under a spreading haw-tree, half-way up the mountain, to breathe our adventurous beasts.

Here two of us dismounted, and while one of the ladies sketched the other in her novel attitude of cavalier, I listened to the talk of Count Giovanni and the Cimbrian. This Cimbrian's name in Italian was Lazzaretti, and in his own tongue Brück, which, pronouncing less regularly, we made Brick, in compliment to his qualities of good fellowship. His broad, honest visage was bordered by a hedge of red beard, and a light of dry humor shone upon it: he looked, we thought, like a Cornishman, and the contrast between him and the *viso sciolto, pensieri stretti* expression of Count Giovanni was curious enough.

Concerning his people, he knew little; but the Capo-gente of Fozza could tell me every thing. Various traditions of their origin were believed among them; Brick himself held to one that they had first come from Denmark. As we sat there under the spreading haw-tree, Count Giovanni and I made him give us the Cimbrian equivalent of some Italian phrases, which the curious may care to see in correspondence with English and German. Of course, German pronunciation must be given to the words: —

English.	*Cimbrian.*	*German.*
I go,	I gehe,	Ich gehe.
Thou goest,	Du gehst,	Du gehst.
He goes,	Ar geht,	Er geht.
We go,	Hamish gehen,	Wir gehen.
You go,	Hamish setender gehnt,	Ihr geht.
They go,	Dandern gehnt,	Sie gehen.
I went,	I bin gegehnt,	Ich bin gegangen.
Thou wentest,	Du bist gegehnt,	Du bist gegangen.
He went,	Der iganget,	Er ist gegangen.
Good day,	Uter tag,	Guten Tag.
Good night,	Uter nast,	Gute Nacht.
How do you do?	Bie estater?	Wie steht's?
How goes it?	Bie gehts?	Wie geht's?
I,	I,	Ich.
Thou,	Du,	Du.
He, she,	Di,	Er, sie.
We,	Borandern,	Wir.
You,	Ihrt,	Ihr.
They,	Dandern,	Sie.
The head,	Da kof,	Der Kopf.
Breast,	Petten,	Brust (*Italian* petto).
Face,	Denne,	Gesicht.
Arm,	Arm,	Arm.
Foot,	Vuss,	Fuss.
Finger,	Vinger,	Finger.
Hand,	Hant,	Hand.
Tree,	Pom,	Baum.
Hat,	Hoit,	Hut.
God,	Got,	Gott.
Heaven,	Debelt,	Himmel.
Earth,	Erda,	Erde.
Mountain,	Perk,	Berg.
Valley,	Tal,	Thal.
Man,	Mann,	Mann.
Woman,	Beip,	Weib.
Lady,	Vrau,	Frau.
Child,	Hint,	Kind.
Brother,	Pruder,	Bruder.
Father,	Vada,	Vater.

English.	*Cimbrian.*	*German.*
Mother,	Muter,	Mutter.
Sister,	Schwester,	Schwester.
Stone,	Stone,	Stein.

A general resemblance to German and English will have been observed in these fragments of Cimbrian, while other words will have been noticed as quite foreign to either.

There was a poor little house of refreshment beside our spreading haw, and a withered old woman came out of it and refreshed us with clear spring water, and our guides and friends with some bitter berries of the mountain, which they admitted were unpleasant to the taste, but declared were very good for the blood. When they had sufficiently improved their blood, we mounted our mules again, and set out with the journey of an hour and a quarter still between us and Fozza.

As we drew near the summit of the mountain our road grew more level, and instead of creeping along by the brinks of precipices, we began to wind through bits of meadow and pleasant valley walled in by lofty heights of rock.

Though September was bland as June at the foot of the mountain, we found its breath harsh and cold on these heights; and we remarked that though there were here and there breadths of wheat, the land was for the most part in sheep pasturage, and the grass looked poor and stinted of summer warmth. We met, at times, the shepherds, who seemed to be of Italian race, and were of the conventional type of shepherds, with regular faces, and two elaborate

curls trained upon their cheeks, as shepherds are always represented in stone over the gates of villas. They bore staves, and their flocks went before them. Encountering us, they saluted us courteously, and when we had returned their greeting, they cried with one voice, — "Ah, lords! is not this a miserable country? The people are poor and the air is cold. It is an unhappy land!" And so passed on, profoundly sad; but we could not help smiling at the vehement popular desire to have the region abused. We answered cheerfully that it was a lovely country. If the air was cold, it was also pure.

We now drew in sight of Fozza, and, at the last moment, just before parting with Brick, we learned that he had passed a whole year in Venice, where he had brought milk from the main-land and sold it in the city. He declared frankly that he counted that year worth all the other years of his life, and that he would never have come back to his native heights but that his father had died, and left his mother and young brothers helpless. He was an honest soul, and I gave him two florins, which I had tacitly appointed him over and above the bargain, with something for the small Brick-bats at home, whom he presently brought to kiss our hands at the house of the Capo-gente.

The village of Fozza is built on a grassy, oblong plain on the crest of the mountain, which declines from it on three sides, and on the north rises high above it into the mists in bleaker and ruggeder acclivities. There are not more than thirty houses in

the village, and I do not think it numbers more than a hundred and fifty souls, if it numbers so many. Indeed, it is one of the smallest of the Sette Communi, of which the capital, Asiago, contains some thousands of people, and lies not far from Vicenza. The poor Fozzatti had a church, however, in their village, in spite of its littleness, and they had just completed a fine new bell tower, which the Capo-gente deplored, and was proud of when I praised it. The church, like all the other edifices, was built of stone; and the village at a little distance might look like broken crags of rock, so well it consorted with the harsh, crude nature about it. Meagre meadow-lands, pathetic with tufts of a certain pale-blue, tearful flower, stretched about the village and southward as far as to that wooded point which had all day been our landmark in the ascent.

Our train drew up at the humble door of the Capo-gente (in Fozza all doors are alike humble), and, leaving our mules, we entered by his wife's invitation, and seated ourselves near the welcome fire of the kitchen — welcome, though we knew that all the sunny Lombard plain below was purple with grapes and black with figs. Again came from the women here the wail of the shepherds: "Ah, lords! is it not a miserable land?" and I began to doubt whether the love which I had heard mountaineers bore to their inclement heights was not altogether fabulous. They made haste to boil us some eggs, and set them before us with some unhappy wine, and while we were eating, the Capo-gente came in.

He was a very well-mannered person, but had, of course, the bashfulness naturally resulting from lonely life at that altitude, where contact with the world must be infrequent. His fellow-citizens seemed to regard him with a kind of affectionate deference, and some of them came in to hear him talk with the strangers. He stood till we prayed him to sit down, and he presently consented to take some wine with us.

After all, however, he could not tell us much of his people which we had not heard before. A tradition existed among them, he said, that their ancestors had fled to these Alps from Marius, and that they had dwelt for a long time in the hollows and caves of the mountains, living and burying their dead in the same secret places. At what time they had been converted to Christianity he could not tell; they had, up to the beginning of the present century, had little or no intercourse with the Italian population by which they were surrounded on all sides. Formerly, they did not intermarry with that race, and it was seldom that any Cimbrian knew its language. But now intermarriage is very frequent; both Italian and Cimbrian are spoken in nearly all the families, and the Cimbrian is gradually falling into disuse. They still, however, have books of religious instruction in their ancient dialect, and until very lately the services of their church were performed in Cimbrian.

I begged the Capo to show us some of their books,

and he brought us two, — one a catechism for children, entitled "Dar Kloane Catechism vor z' Beloseland vortraghet in z' gaprecht von siben Komünen, un vier Halghe Gasang. 1842. Padova." The other book it grieved me to see, for it proved that I was not the only one tempted in recent times to visit these ancient people, ambitious to bear to them the relation of discoverer, as it were. A High-Dutch Columbus, from Vienna, had been before me, and I could only come in for Amerigo Vespucci's tempered glory. This German savant had dwelt a week in these lonely places, patiently compiling a dictionary of their tongue, which, when it was printed, he had sent to the Capo. I am magnanimous enough to give the name of his book, that the curious may buy it if they like. It is called "Johann Andreas Schweller's Cimbrisches Wörterbuch. Joseph Bergman. Vienna, 1855."

Concerning the present Cimbri, the Capo said that in his community they were chiefly hunters, woodcutters, and charcoal-burners, and that they practiced their primitive crafts in those gloomier and wilder heights we saw to the northward, and descended to the towns of the plain to make sale of their fagots, charcoal, and wild-beast skins. In Asiago and the larger communities they were farmers and tradesmen like the Italians; and the Capo believed that the Cimbri, in all their villages, numbered near ten thousand. He could tell me of no particular customs or usages, and believed they did

not differ from the Italians now except in race and language.* They are, of course, subject to the Austrian Government, but not so strictly as the Italians are; and though they are taxed and made to do military service, they are otherwise left to regulate their affairs pretty much at their pleasure.

The Capo ended his discourse with much polite regret that he had nothing more worthy to tell us; and, as if to make us amends for having come so far to learn so little, he said there was a hermit living near, whom we might like to see, and sent his son to conduct us to the hermitage. It turned out to be the white object which we had seen gleaming in the wood on the mountain from so great distance below, and the wood turned out to be a pleasant beechen grove, in which we found the hermit cutting fagots.

* The English traveler Rose, who (to my further discomfiture, I find) visited Asiago in 1817, mentions that the Cimbri have the Celtic custom of *waking* the dead. "If a traveler dies by the way, they plant a cross upon the spot, and all who pass by cast a stone upon his cairn. Some go in certain seasons in the year to high places and woods, where it is supposed they worshiped their divinities, but the origin of the custom is forgot amongst themselves." If a man dies by violence, they lay him out with his hat and shoes on, as if to give him the appearance of a wayfarer, and "symbolize one surprised in the great journey of life." A woman dying in childbed is dressed for the grave in her bridal ornaments. Mr. Rose is very scornful of the notion that these people are Cimbri, and holds that it is "more consonant to all the evidence of history to say, that the flux and reflux of Teutonic invaders at different periods deposited this backwater of barbarians" in the district they now inhabit. "The whole space, which in addition to the seven burghs contains twenty-four villages, is bounded by rivers, alps, and hills. Its most precise limits are the Brenta to the east, and the Astico to the west."

He was warmly dressed in clothes without rent, and wore the clerical knee-breeches. He saluted us with a cricket-like chirpiness of manner, and was greatly amazed to hear that we had come all the way from America to visit him. His hermitage was built upon the side of a white-washed chapel to St. Francis, and contained three or four little rooms or cupboards, in which the hermit dwelt and meditated. They opened into the chapel, of which the hermit had the care, and which he kept neat and clean like himself. He told us proudly that once a year, on the day of the titular saint, a priest came and said mass in that chapel, and it was easy to see that this was the great occasion of the old man's life. For forty years, he said, he had been devout; and for twenty-five he had dwelt in this place, where the goodness of God and the charity of the poor people around had kept him from want. Altogether, he was a pleasant enough hermit, not in the least spiritual, but gentle, simple, and evidently sincere. We gave some small coins of silver to aid him to continue his life of devotion, and Count Giovanni bestowed some coppers with the stately blessing, "*Iddio vi benedica, padre mio!*"

So we left the hermitage, left Fozza, and started down the mountain on foot, for no one may ride down those steeps. Long before we reached the bottom, we had learned to loathe mountains and to long for dead levels during the rest of life. Yet the descent was picturesque, and in some things even more interesting than the ascent had been. We met more

people: now melancholy shepherds with their flocks; now swine-herds and swine-herdesses with herds of wild black pigs of the Italian breed; now men driving asses that brayed and woke long, loud, and most musical echoes in the hills; now whole peasant families driving cows, horses, and mules to the plains below. On the way down, fragments of autobiography began, with the opportunities of conversation, to come from the Count Giovanni, and we learned that he was a private soldier at home on that *permesso* which the Austrian Government frequently gives its less able-bodied men in times of peace. He had been at home some years, and did not expect to be again called into the service. He liked much better to be in charge of the cave at Oliero than to carry the musket, though he confessed that he liked to see the world, and that soldiering brought one acquainted with many places. He had not many ideas, and the philosophy of his life chiefly regarded deportment toward strangers who visited the cave. He held it an error in most custodians to show discontent when travelers gave them little; and he said that if he received never so much, he believed it wise not to betray exultation. "Always be contented, and nothing more," said Count Giovanni.

"It is what you people always promise beforehand," I said, "when you bargain with strangers, to do them a certain service for what they please; but afterward they must pay what *you* please or have trouble. I know you will not be content with what I give you."

"If I am not content," cried Count Giovanni, "call me the greatest ass in the world!"

And I am bound to say that, for all I could see through the mask of his face, he was satisfied with what I gave him, though it was not much.

He had told us casually that he was nephew of a nobleman of a certain rich and ancient family in Venice, who sent him money while in the army, but this made no great impression on me; and though I knew there was enough noble poverty in Italy to have given rise to the proverb, *Un conte che non conta, non conta niente*, yet I confess that it was with a shock of surprise I heard our guide and servant saluted by a lounger in Valstagna with "*Sior conte, servitor suo!*" I looked narrowly at him, but there was no ray of feeling or pride visible in his pale, languid visage as he responded, "*Buona sera, caro.*"

Still, after that revelation we simple plebeians, who had been all day heaping shawls and guide-books upon Count Giovanni, demanding menial offices from him, and treating him with good-natured slight, felt uncomfortable in his presence, and welcomed the appearance of our carriage with our driver, who, having started drunk from Bassano in the morning, had kept drunk all day at Valstagna, and who now drove us back wildly over the road, and almost made us sigh for the security of mules ambitious of the brinks of precipices.