

III.—AN ACCOUNT OF THE LOFFODEN ISLANDS OF NORWAY.*

It is not often that we obtain a description of that remarkable group of islands on the east of Norway which our geographical handbooks mention under the name of the Loffoden, and but few of the tourists to Norway consider it worth their while to visit these rocky islands. Recently, however, we have received a very graphic description of the Loffoden Islands in a German work, which we do not hesitate to lay before our readers, as the whole work will count among the best works on Norway which have appeared in the German language. The title of the book is *Fahrten durch Norwegen und die Lappmark* [jaunts through Norway and Lapland], by G. Hartung and A. Dulk. Stuttgart. Kröner Brothers, 1877. 8vo.

The two authors have divided the work between them, the greater portion, treating of Norway, being from the pen of Mr. Hartung, which is followed by the beautiful description of Lapland by Mr. Dulk. We can earnestly recommend the work as very interesting and instructive reading, especially to those who contemplate a journey to Scandinavia, and by reproducing the description of the Loffoden Islands we shall give the reader an idea of the intellectual enjoyment which awaits him in this attractive volume.

"The closer we examine the peculiar coast formation of Norway the more will the supposition gain strength that here the ocean has covered the lower portion of an Alpine mountain range, a Cordillera with its previously-existing valleys. It is an undoubted fact that during and after the glacial period the land has repeatedly risen and sunk; but it cannot be proved with absolute certainty that during a preceding period this whole mountain range was considerably higher than it is now; nor can it be denied as absolutely impossible. Reasons, however, may be given for making this the most probable supposition.

"At present the Scandinavian Cordillera only rises to about half the height of the Alps. If, after the formation of the valleys existing at the present time, the sea had risen among the Alps to a height of 5,000 feet, what a different aspect would the valley of the Reuss, *e. g.*, present, which now shows such grand landscapes! The water would extend through the Schöllenen and past Andermatt toward the mountain passes of the Dissentis, the Gotthard, and the Furka. From the landing-place of the vessels these mountain-passes could easily be reached, while at present they are only accessible by a long and difficult road. These

* *Die Lofoten*, from *Das Ausland*, 50th year, No. 31. Stuttgart, July 30, 1877. Translated by Herman Jacobson.

passes would, as heretofore, be surrounded by vast mountains rising perpendicularly, and, in comparison with these, the elevation of these passes above the level of the sea would appear quite insignificant. The sea would approach these passes from all sides, through the valleys of the Rhone, the Levantine, and the Tavetsch; many other valleys would be entirely overflowed by it, while more detached mountains, like the Rigi and the Pilatus, would be surrounded by it, and thus form islands of different size.

"This is in reality the character of the fiord, sound, and island belt of the Norwegian coast. Here we really see the high Alpine passes which in our imaginary sketch we saw extending to the level of the sea, forming the low and narrow connecting links between vast sea-bound mountain ranges. As in the Alps the passes are measured by thousands, so here the so-called "Ejder" are measured by hundreds of feet. At the upper end of the Ofoten fiord an "ejde" between mountain ranges 3,000 feet in height forms a mountain pass 800 feet above the level of the sea; between mountains of 4-5,000 feet the Tamokvand "ejde" rises to a height of 550, the Balsfiord "ejde" of 200, and the Lyngs "ejde" of only 150 feet above the level of the sea; and more is not needed to show the transition from "ejde" to sound. Here the level of the sea has risen higher, and the moment the traveler leaves his vessel he steps on high mountain sides of the ancient Scandinavian Cordillera.

"The combined island groups of Vesteraalen and the Loffoden are thus in reality a branch of the great Scandinavian mountain range partly flooded by the ocean. The rising floods entered the valleys, approached the mountain passes, and covered some of these entirely, so that many became low "ejder" while others became sounds. For thousands of years the breakers have exercised their destructive influence along this coast, until finally the mountain ranges became only very loosely connected, or entirely torn from each other like shreds. In examining a tolerably good map of Norway, the strange and fantastic outline of these islands will indicate very correctly the torn character of the mountains; and any one visiting these islands will find that the reality comes fully up to the preconceived idea. The steamer traverses this strange island-world; now it leaves a sound and circumnavigates an outer island, and before us extends the illimitable ocean in all its grandeur; now it turns again toward the coast, the sound becomes narrower and narrower till at last it seems entirely closed, when, turning a corner, a narrow channel discloses the entrance to another and broader sound.

"The rugged mountains present themselves to view from every side; we also get a glimpse of the northwest coast of the Loffoden Islands looking toward the open sea, and losing themselves in the hazy distance we see the long rows of promontories. In Vesteraalen, forests cover the lower slopes in many places; in many parts of the coast one farm

surrounded by meadows and fields follows the other, or, separated by wild and gloomy rocks, they seem like fresh green oases among the rocky desert. But in the Loffoden nothing is seen but the bare rocks, with fishing villages close to the shore; here the rocks rise high into the air like sharp saws, like crenulated walls, peaks, and cones; vast walls of rock rise abruptly from the sea; the rich variety of forms is interesting in the highest degree, and fantastically shaped rocks powerfully engage the imagination of the traveler. There the rocky promontory seems adorned with the gigantic statue of an old Norse warrior, some Harold or Olaf; with low helmet and long flowing gown he stands there leaning on his sword, the very expression of self-confident strength. In another place we see, on a giddy height, two rocks strongly resembling a loving couple, the shepherd with his shepherdess. There again a giant seems caught in the narrow fissure of the rock, making furious endeavors to free himself from his captivity; and often we meet with rocks strangely resembling a monk, who with his hood pulled over his head climbs up the steep rocky walls. All these wonders, however, are thrown in the shade by the wild romantic shores of the Raft Sound.

“Leaving the broad expanse of water which separates Vesteraalen from the Loffoden Islands, the steamer, passing between numberless low rocky islands, reaches the mouth of the Raft Sound, which separates the Loffoden Islands from the large island of Hindö. Here we behold a stream which, breaking its way through vast mountain ranges, bears a strong resemblance to the Frazer River of British Columbia as it appears seen from the mouth above the first turn; even the counter-current is found here; but we soon become aware of the fact that this is a northern Frazer; the two yachts under full sail, as following the stream they pass us, and the frame houses on the shores, tell us that we are in Norway, whose characteristic natural features cannot long remain concealed. Meadows and shrubs cover the lower portion of the mountain sides; above these, sharp rocky peaks rise high above the snowy summits, and mountain streams and waterfalls send their icy waters into the sea with a roaring noise. Here we find the genuine Norway mountains and cascades, so often seen on paintings and so easily recognized even without the names.

“Nearly all these sounds have their own peculiar currents. Who has not heard of the Maelstrom? It may not be so generally known, however, that the fishermen of these parts well acquainted with its peculiarities enter it in light open boats, and, driven by the current, cast out their nets, and only avoid it when at times it rises threateningly. Now we get a view of the wide southern portion of the sound and of the large island of Molla, which extends before its mouth. Our attention is involuntarily attracted by the remarkable mountain called the “Troid-fjeld” (the demons’ rock), which comes in view as we pass a steep rocky promontory on the right shore. Like a fantastic castle built by giants, surmounted by Gothic battlements, and with a cupola and two turrets

on its western end, its broad and massive façade looking north extends before us. As our steamer advances, the other wing, looking east, becomes visible, its gray rocky walls richly ornamented with silver-white snow. The roof is likewise surmounted by fantastic battlements, and it is supported by massive pillars with strange pointed excrescences. And as the steamer proceeds farther the view changes again; the vast rocky front seems torn asunder; nothing remains but the grand ruins of former splendor, and even these gradually dissolve into loosely-joined summits and peaks. But before the enchantment disappears entirely we see another and strangely-shaped rock standing by itself at the foot of the castle. There it stands like the demon of the castle; raising her face, with the regular Scandinavian features, toward heaven, she lifts her right arm, draped by her flowing dress as high as the shoulder. But as we pass on even this turns out to be nothing but a steep rock; like a dream the whole fantastic creation disappears, and nothing but the hard and cold reality remains.

“From Lödingen, on the Tjæld Sound, which separates Hindö from the mainland, a string of fishing-stations extends along the west fiord on the southeastern coast of the islands to their southwest end at Värö. The center of the great Loffoden fisheries, mentioned even in foreign papers, lies along the Raft Sound, beginning at the island of East Vaag; the first great fishing-station is Svölvär, and the most important of all is Henningsvär. Between East and West Vaag, where the Grimsö-stream begins as a broad bay, a group of small rocky islands extends before the steep coast of the southeastern point of East Vaag. Narrow sounds and deep bays afford shelter to the ships, and a fine large light-house shows at night-time the way to the safe harbor. No trees and no shrubs are found on these islands; only grass encircles the lower rocks and mountains. Along the coast there are numerous warehouses; farther back there are a number of two-story houses, and a simple but rather large church painted red; all these are frame buildings, and are erected in places specially selected for the purpose. Some distance from these buildings the large guano-factory is seen, built of wood, and having two tall chimneys painted a grayish-white, with black felt roofs. Close to it there is an enormous pile of fish heads, broad and high, resembling somewhat a stack of grain. Since the guano-factories pay from 43 to 53 cents for a hundred fish-heads they are no longer thrown into the sea, but are carefully gathered. It is estimated that every year about 20,000,000 fish are caught near the Loffoden Islands.

“Besides the above-mentioned buildings quite a number of little frame houses are scattered all over the islands. With their small windows, and their roofs of turf with low wooden chimneys, or still more frequently stove-pipes taking the place of chimneys, they can at a distance scarcely be distinguished from the ground. By exposure to wind and rain the woodwork assumes the gray color of the rocks, and the roofs begin to resemble patches of greenward.

“According to one estimate Mr. Drejer finds room in these frame huts for 3,000 fishermen, and our pilot assured us that as many as 6,000 to 8,000 live here. During the fishing season each one pays \$1.60 rent (for the whole season). Some small pine woods found in sheltered parts of the islands furnish fuel, although by no means enough to satisfy the demand; peat, which is quite plentiful, is therefore used extensively. Long poles resting on high pegs are used for drying the fish, resembling very much those simple contrivances on which the fishermen on the Prussian coast of the Baltic hang their nets. But here we also find frame-works of several stories.

“Henningsv ar is the largest fishing-station, and is by a submarine telegraph connected with the rest of the world.

“Wherever a suitable place is found on this steep and rugged coast, fishing-stations have been established. In some of the most favorable places a few two-story dwelling houses may be seen with outbuildings and small gardens, a few trees and shrubs giving a more cheerful aspect to the scene. But all around on the rough, uneven ground turf-covered huts are seen, resting partly on the naked rock, partly on props of wood and stone, while some appear like birds’-nests pasted on the rock. Goats, sheep, and occasionally a few cows, nibble the scanty grass growing in small patches here and there among the rocks. Rough steps have been cut in the rock, leading to the landing-place of the boats, and on a promontory or little island a light-house shows the nightly voyager the location of the fishing-station. To these places the fishermen come from the north and from the south in their open boats as early as January. Some, however, have a more convenient arrangement: they leave their boats at the fishing-stations and travel by steamer.

“Twenty thousand fishermen come to these inexhaustible seas every year; traders come here in their yachts, and everything is life and bustle. But what a life of labor and danger! A strange feeling overcomes the traveler when beholding all this activity and the thousands of human beings drawn hither for the sake of gain, regardless of all its dangers. In the darkness of the long night the fishermen enter their boats, for the brief day-time often shortened by gloomy skies would be by far too short for the work which has to be accomplished. Threatening like dark and shapeless shadows do the rocky coasts rise behind them; before them extends the vast and gloomy ocean. They disregard cold and wind as long as the waves are not too high so as to make fishing impossible. When the weather is unfavorable they stay at home; and as a general rule they understand the indications of the weather. But who can infallibly predict the weather in those latitudes and in that season of the year? Prudence and caution are not always regarded, and many a storm overtakes the daring fishermen. At the time when I was traveling among these islands by steamer the weather had been exceptionally fine for several days, the thermometer rising to

77 degrees (Fahrenheit); even while out at sea the weather was warm, calm, and sunny, and in some of the harbors surrounded by high rocks the heat was actually oppressive.

“Such sunny summer days, appreciated all the more because they are few and far between, occur in all these northern latitudes; but not so often as to make the inhabitants forget how far north they live; for the changes in the weather are very sudden. Even now the horizon began to grow dark; a black wall of clouds rose rapidly in the south over the Vestfjord, and we had scarcely reached Svolvär when a whirlwind swept along the coast with appalling fury. For about half an hour a perfect hurricane was raging, then it suddenly grew calm again, and under a cloudy sky with a moist atmosphere and an occasional drizzle the steamer continued its course, gently rocked by small waves. When we reached Reine, where massive cyclopean rocks rise above the low coast, forming crater-like cavities partly filled with snow, another whirlwind was raging. The pilot said that here was the cave of the winds, and truly when a short while after we left Reine it was perfectly calm.

“Such sudden whirlwinds coming on without the slightest premonitory sign are by no means of rare occurrence in these northern latitudes. If in the case of such a sudden whirlwind the crew do not immediately strike sail the boat is upset, and the only means of safety is to reach the bottom of the boat and to cling to it. Most of the inhabitants of these parts carry a strong knife in a leathern sheath in their belt; no fisherman is ever without such a knife. This knife they then plunge deep into the keel and hold fast to the handle. If, as happens sometimes, one of these boats is driven on the coast, the knives sticking in the keel, among them one broken off at the handle, resembling the fatal Runic characters, tell more eloquently than words could do one of those tragedies of which more than one is acted every year in those stormy seas. All along the west coast of Norway far up toward the north it is considered a rule that of three persons regularly following the occupation of fishermen one meets with his death in the waves of the ocean.”