

THE BRECKNOCK BEACONS.

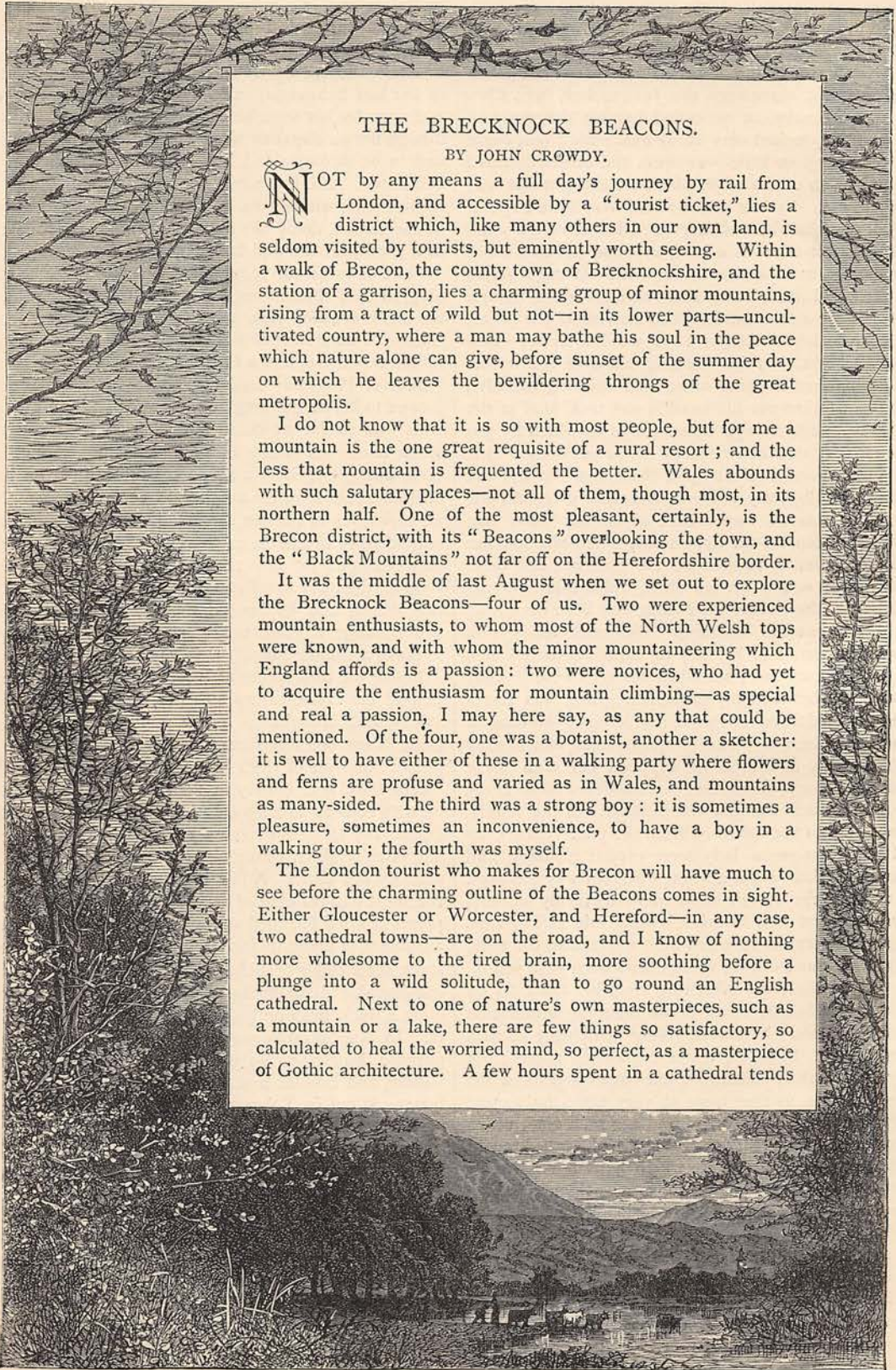
BY JOHN CROWDY.

NOT by any means a full day's journey by rail from London, and accessible by a "tourist ticket," lies a district which, like many others in our own land, is seldom visited by tourists, but eminently worth seeing. Within a walk of Brecon, the county town of Brecknockshire, and the station of a garrison, lies a charming group of minor mountains, rising from a tract of wild but not—in its lower parts—uncultivated country, where a man may bathe his soul in the peace which nature alone can give, before sunset of the summer day on which he leaves the bewildering throngs of the great metropolis.

I do not know that it is so with most people, but for me a mountain is the one great requisite of a rural resort; and the less that mountain is frequented the better. Wales abounds with such salutary places—not all of them, though most, in its northern half. One of the most pleasant, certainly, is the Brecon district, with its "Beacons" overlooking the town, and the "Black Mountains" not far off on the Herefordshire border.

It was the middle of last August when we set out to explore the Brecknock Beacons—four of us. Two were experienced mountain enthusiasts, to whom most of the North Welsh tops were known, and with whom the minor mountaineering which England affords is a passion: two were novices, who had yet to acquire the enthusiasm for mountain climbing—as special and real a passion, I may here say, as any that could be mentioned. Of the four, one was a botanist, another a sketcher: it is well to have either of these in a walking party where flowers and ferns are profuse and varied as in Wales, and mountains as many-sided. The third was a strong boy: it is sometimes a pleasure, sometimes an inconvenience, to have a boy in a walking tour; the fourth was myself.

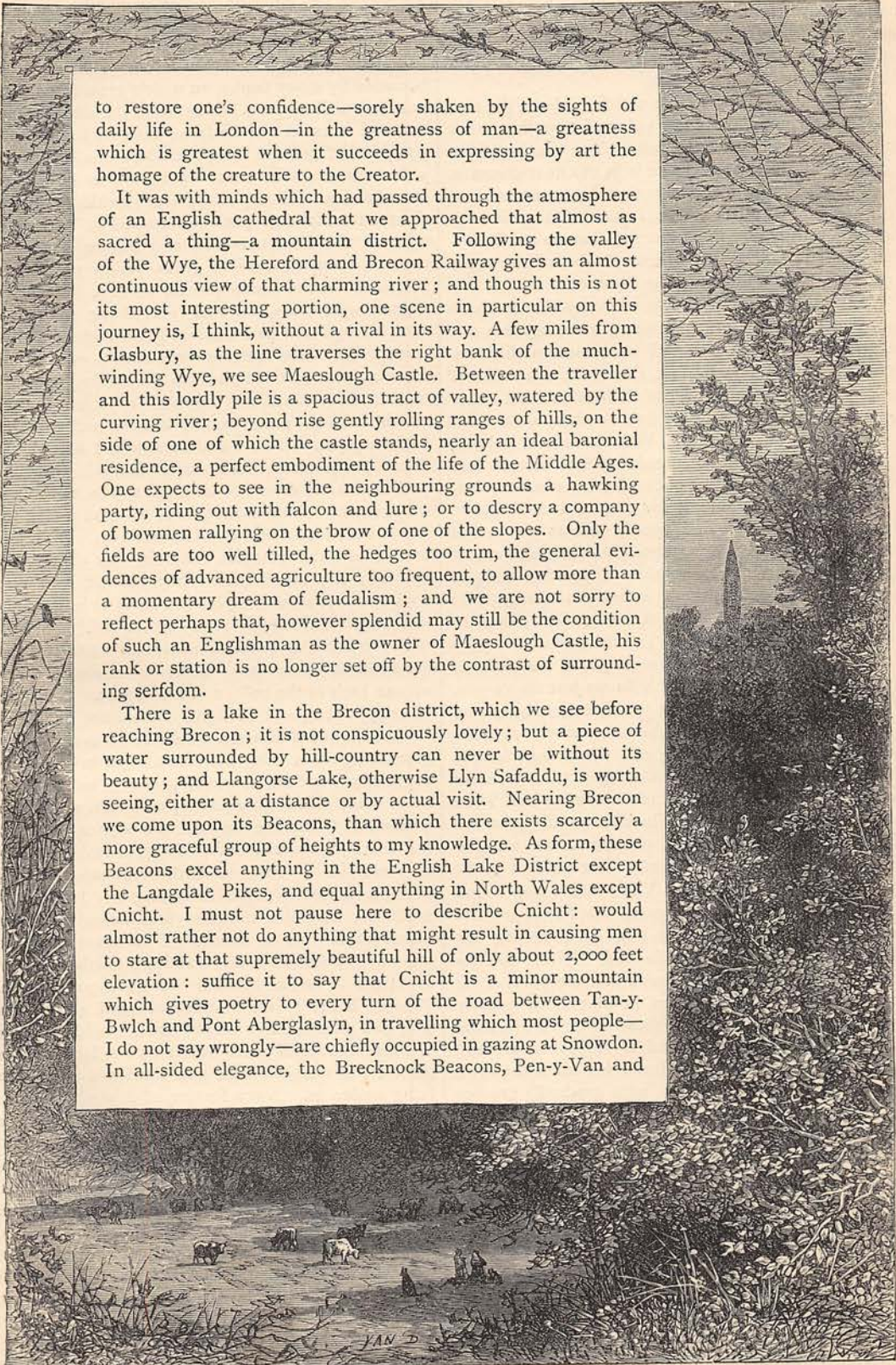
The London tourist who makes for Brecon will have much to see before the charming outline of the Beacons comes in sight. Either Gloucester or Worcester, and Hereford—in any case, two cathedral towns—are on the road, and I know of nothing more wholesome to the tired brain, more soothing before a plunge into a wild solitude, than to go round an English cathedral. Next to one of nature's own masterpieces, such as a mountain or a lake, there are few things so satisfactory, so calculated to heal the worried mind, so perfect, as a masterpiece of Gothic architecture. A few hours spent in a cathedral tends



to restore one's confidence—sorely shaken by the sights of daily life in London—in the greatness of man—a greatness which is greatest when it succeeds in expressing by art the homage of the creature to the Creator.

It was with minds which had passed through the atmosphere of an English cathedral that we approached that almost as sacred a thing—a mountain district. Following the valley of the Wye, the Hereford and Brecon Railway gives an almost continuous view of that charming river; and though this is not its most interesting portion, one scene in particular on this journey is, I think, without a rival in its way. A few miles from Glasbury, as the line traverses the right bank of the much-winding Wye, we see Maeslough Castle. Between the traveller and this lordly pile is a spacious tract of valley, watered by the curving river; beyond rise gently rolling ranges of hills, on the side of one of which the castle stands, nearly an ideal baronial residence, a perfect embodiment of the life of the Middle Ages. One expects to see in the neighbouring grounds a hawking party, riding out with falcon and lure; or to descry a company of bowmen rallying on the brow of one of the slopes. Only the fields are too well tilled, the hedges too trim, the general evidences of advanced agriculture too frequent, to allow more than a momentary dream of feudalism; and we are not sorry to reflect perhaps that, however splendid may still be the condition of such an Englishman as the owner of Maeslough Castle, his rank or station is no longer set off by the contrast of surrounding serfdom.

There is a lake in the Brecon district, which we see before reaching Brecon; it is not conspicuously lovely; but a piece of water surrounded by hill-country can never be without its beauty; and Llangorse Lake, otherwise Llyn Safaddu, is worth seeing, either at a distance or by actual visit. Nearing Brecon we come upon its Beacons, than which there exists scarcely a more graceful group of heights to my knowledge. As form, these Beacons excel anything in the English Lake District except the Langdale Pikes, and equal anything in North Wales except Cnicht. I must not pause here to describe Cnicht: would almost rather not do anything that might result in causing men to stare at that supremely beautiful hill of only about 2,000 feet elevation: suffice it to say that Cnicht is a minor mountain which gives poetry to every turn of the road between Tan-y-Bwlch and Pont Aberglaslyn, in travelling which most people—I do not say wrongly—are chiefly occupied in gazing at Snowdon. In all-sided elegance, the Brecknock Beacons, Pen-y-Van and



Y-Fan-Corn-dû by name, are almost of equal value in the landscape to Cnicht. Wherever we went for miles round, scarcely a mile passed but we importuned the artist of our party to take yet another and another sketch of their varying aspects.

The ascent of Pen-y-Van (2,910 feet above the sea-level) is, of course, the chief point of a walking tour among the Brecknock Beacons. You see him from the town of Brecon; there he is in the near distance, so impressive in form and size that he seems present with you though miles away; I doubt if there is anything more truly fine in landscape than to see Pen-y-Van as you walk along "Struet," one of the main streets of Brecon, filling up the distance.

We left Brecon for an ascent of Pen-y-Van at about ten o'clock on a doubtful morning; mornings are, unfortunately, too often doubtful in mountain districts. Prevalence of rain is, in fact, the great drawback of such localities, and the lover of hill-walks must either be patient enough to wait for fine weather, or he must learn to love and face rain. We—those two, at least, of us who had done mountain walks before—had learned to take rain as one of the charms of mountains; and, however incredible it may seem, I deliberately say that there are fine and special effects of rain and cloud, and fog and storm, amongst mountains, which make an ascent in wet weather a positive delight. You get wet through to the skin, but you disregard it; and you take no harm from it, with ordinary care in keeping up the circulation. The discomfort is by no means so great as it would seem; and the sight of whirling mist driven over the hill-tops just above you, of clouds bearing down upon you and drenching you, of rain sweeping past you in the valley as you near the summit; the sudden opening of a dense fog, like the drawing up of a curtain, disclosing a wild piece of scenery; the dashes of sunshine in the lowland while you are being pelted with rain above—all these are effects worth witnessing, and peculiar to wet weather. It was with such effects, chiefly, that we had to be satisfied in ascending Pen-y-Van; and I am bound to say the two novices of the party failed to appreciate them. We got up to Pen-y-Van by following for some miles an obsolete coach-road. These are interesting features now to be found in some parts of the country; railroads have taken, in places, so entirely the work of wheel-roads, that these latter have become almost disused. Such a road is traceable between Brecon and Merthyr. For a few miles out of the town it is good and hard; then it gets gradually greener and greener; finally it is almost lost, except to the eye which searches with a purpose on the side of the "cwm," or valley; and as it gets more obscure it becomes softer and more turfy; it climbs by moderate inclines, as the necessities of its old uses prescribed; and it brings you at length to a gap or notch at a low point in the ridge of hills, reaching which you find yourself in what is always a fine position, on a neck (or "hawse," as the Lake District term is), with a view on either hand down into two valleys. Such a road, however, never takes you to, but only towards, a summit; and at this "hawse," at the head of Cwm Cynwyn,

we struck up the side of the mountain. Here the features of the walk undergo an entire change. For an hour or two before we had been traversing the submontane section of the scenery, along a road bounded by stony banks, on which grew ferns without number, with all sorts of flowers in the ditches, and all sorts of trees in the hedges: nuts for the boy of the party (who, perhaps, is apt to show his inconvenient side when such-like small spoils are to be gathered) strawberries, wild raspberry, honeysuckle, fox-gloves—the road sometimes quite overarched with trees. We take to the mountain-side, and nature has another aspect: long, thread-like grass, yellow potentillas in it, rushes in the damp places, mosses, heather, wild thyme, watercress, all and everything soaked with rain, though now and then we got a sort of half-sunshine. We were getting very silent, wet, and hot, when a shout of triumph from the leading man of the four made known that he had descried the cairn which in such parts usually crowns and marks the highest point. Here we all assembled and shivered. There was no view; but the true mountain enthusiasm, as I have said, does not demand a view as the necessary reward of an ascent, or look upon a visit to the top of a mountain in a fog as a lost day. We rejoiced, two of us: the botanist, I admit, was cheerless and cynical; the inconvenient boy scoffed, and quoted with derision something he had read in a guide-book about the view "amply repaying the toil."

For traversing pathless mountain tracts two things are absolutely necessary—an Ordnance map of the scale of one inch to the mile, and a compass. Given these two appliances, and daylight, one cannot be lost; but in the absence of either, a mountain excursion may become dangerous. Exposure for a night in these places, especially a wet night, would probably be the death of most men, either immediately or within a week; and without an Ordnance map and a compass, to be lost is not merely possible, but in foggy weather probable. So we found. We had an Ordnance map, but the fog was too dense to admit of taking any landmark for guidance, and the compass had been accidentally dismounted. So we started off to descend, guessing our way. After an hour's walking something occurred to create a doubt whether we were going towards Brecon, home to our dinner, or right away from it. Fog had enveloped us all the hour. Suddenly, by one of those wonderful transformations which occur in such places, the mist divided, and disclosed the country lying under us. Not a feature of it could we recognise as being what we thought we ought to see. There was a valley stretching out, a stream at its bottom, a bridge, a house: where were we? It was a moment of some tension. Already the fog was closing round us again, and we had to concentrate an intense attention on the Ordnance map and the rapidly disappearing view beneath us, straining our eyes and brain against time to recognise our position while the valley, the stream, and the bridge were yet visible. Just as all was becoming veiled again, we recognised on the map the features of the country immediately below us: we were walking, and had been walking for an hour,

in a direction exactly opposite to that intended. A short consultation led to a resolution to get down the mountain-side into the valley which the gleam of light had revealed, and there strike the road. We had scarcely started again when a storm came on; the rain fell in torrents, thunder broke out, all the mountain-side began to roar with hundreds of little streams. At length we got to the road at the bottom of the valley, nine miles from our dinner, when we ought to have been but four. The moral is obvious, and a very real moral it is: not to take mountain excursions in pathless places without a compass. But it is no affectation to say that our rainy ascent of Pen-y-Van was not only not dispiriting, but exhilarating; and, helped by temporary refreshments at the house, a small inn chiefly frequented by shepherds, we reached Brecon in high spirits, and dry—or rather dried—clothes. The volume which the rain had given to the numerous streams and occasional waterfalls was a source of considerable compensation to the unbelieving section of our party.

Still, mountains are not the only attraction of a mountain country. Where there is hill there is valley, and the one sets off the other, each lending the other a charm. If pretty streams, as at Brecon, traverse the valleys, a new class of beauties is always open to the walker for days or hours when the mountain-side is, for any reason, not in his programme. Brecon is rich in river and river-side scenery; the Usk, the Yskir (or little Usk), and the Honddu combining to create charming pieces of country for quiet wanderings.

Once a week, at least, the most restless of walkers must prefer a quiet day. There are Sunday walks near Brecon, as well as work for the explorer of the Beacons; and one of these is along the left bank of the river Usk. Crossing a bridge you may descend to the bank, along which runs a footpath through meadows, with the ever-cackling river (red when we were there with the mud of the sandstone hills after a storm) on your left, fringed with alders and occasional ash and oak, and every yard suggestive of trout. As you proceed there is gradually less meadow and more trees, till the footpath is almost lost in a thick wood, and you get into a district where men and houses are scarce, and Hereford cows the most frequent inhabitants, lying or standing lazily in the marshy bits of green by the river-side, and looking at you with a sleepy wonder, as much as to say, "Well, how long do you mean to stay gaping at us? We want to go on feeding."

After a quiet, slow stroll of two hours or so, may be reached from Brecon an old farm called Y Gaer, anciently a Roman military station: there are here the traces of a camp, and a Roman military road, the Via Julia Montana, or Julian Mountain Road. A very curious and almost affecting monument stands by the wooded side of this Roman road near the farm-house. It consists of a thick, rough slab of stone, six feet high, and about two and a half wide: at first sight it seems nothing but an old gravestone, as it is; but in a few moments you perceive traces on its face of two figures—a Roman and a woman. The stone is so weathered and decayed that you might well pass it without dis-

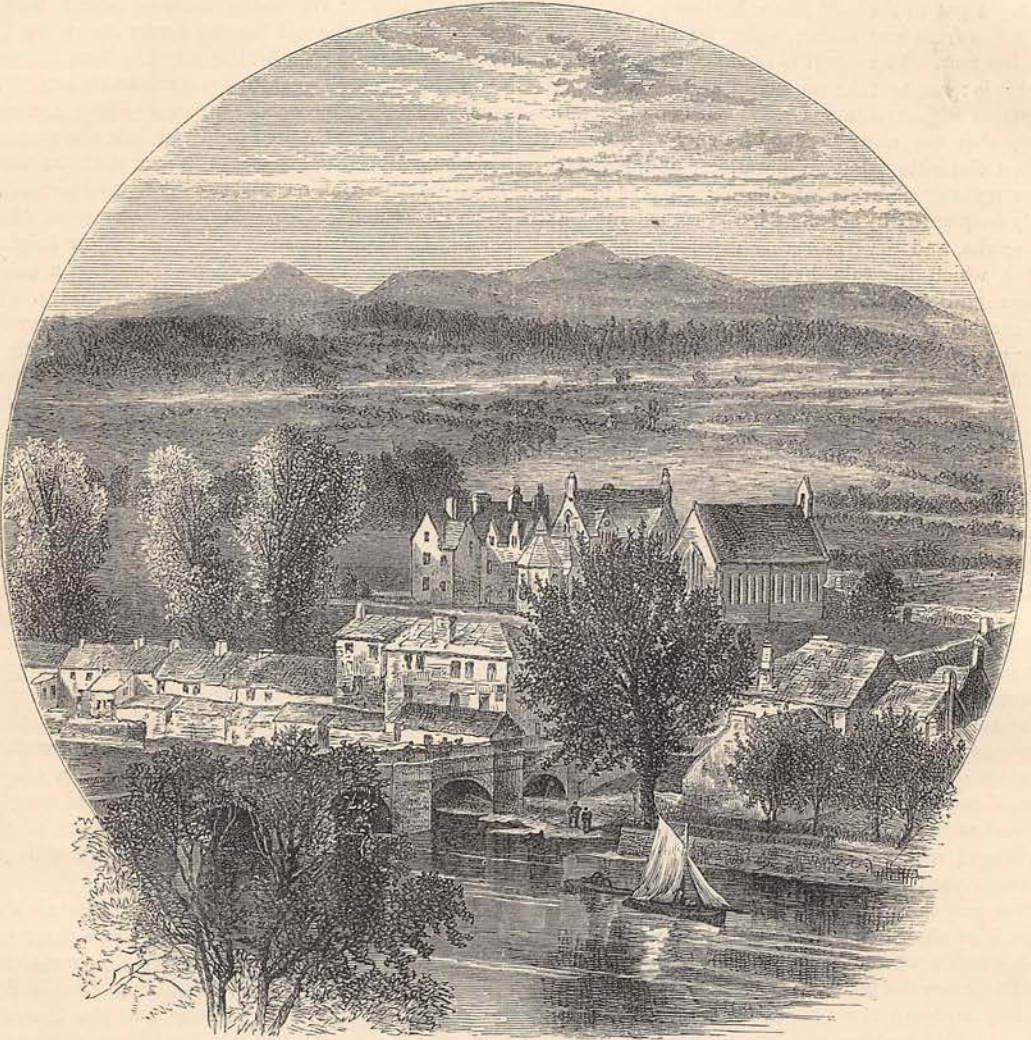
cerning the figures; but they are seen at once when attention is directed to them. Was it a general who died in camp here, on an expedition to reduce England to a Roman province? And who was the lady? A Roman matron who followed her husband to the wars, to see the Brecknock Beacons, and died there? or a British girl who won the Roman's heart, and married him in camp? We came back—doubled back, I might say—by the old Roman road; above the Usk, but parallel with it. All the way are beautiful peeps at the Beacons, through hedge-gaps and gates. The road is flanked by woods, amongst which are noble specimens of spruce firs; and you hear the river ever babbling, but do not see it. Brecon itself, as viewed from near the Usk on this side, is a very picturesque town; its chief feature being the tower of St. Mary's Church, a large square one of considerable height, of red sandstone (and therefore pinkish grey in colour), well toned by age, and half covered with ivy. This stands up free and tall and firm, above and away from all the other buildings, which indeed are mostly low houses, not entering into competition with it. There is a good deal of quietly satisfactory domestic architecture near—some farm-houses here and there with gables, roofs tilted over windows, lean-to annexes, all having the solid appearance which arises from the use of stone in blocks sufficiently thick to resist the weather of a mountain district. The woods, the meadows, the river-banks, and the old walls are full of flowers, which engaged the learned attention of our botanist, and the unlearned admiration of the rest of us: foxglove in abundance, harebells, arums, pennywort, willowherb (the greater and less), purple loosestrife, knapweed, two or three sorts of St. John's wort, cow-wheat (not a bit like wheat), enchanter's nightshade, stachys, agrimony, goat's-beard, betony, potentilla, vetches of all sorts, yellow vetchling, and, what was a constant cause of straying to the inconvenient boy of our party, nuts. Finding these flowers and looking at these views you may pass six hours, and they will go as three.

There is, as I have already briefly stated above, a lake near Brecon: it is of some size—three miles, namely, by one, or thereabouts—Llangorse Lake, lying between the Black Mountains (which divide Herefordshire from Brecknock) and the Brecknock Beacons. Here, though the banks are swampy and not easily traversed, are boats and fishing, and fine views of the Beacons. We bargained for one of the clumsy and ill-fitted boats, and pulled down the water. On the banks are pretty stone villas here and there, and three churches; by the shallows, reeds and rushes, into and behind which we drove our boat, gathering water-lilies which smelt like roses, and looked like—well, like water-lilies. Two of us who swim had a plunge from the boat; the botanist, I think, would have kept on swimming about round the boat for an hour, but came suddenly upon a submerged tangle of long, stringy, hairy weed, which panic-struck him for fear of his life, and he was into the boat in an instant.

The Lake of Llangorse, as already observed, is apparently little known except to lovers of fishing, and

the boats obtainable are heavy and uninviting ; good enough to carry a man, a rod, and a supply of gentles, but by no means suggestive of poetry, romance, or love-making. But this sheet of water has its charms upon close acquaintance : what expanse of water has not? From Llangorse, the name-place of the lake, is a fine

After Pen-y-Van one of the most prominent mountains of this district is Capellante. The height of this fine mass is 2,382 feet. We approached Capellante by taking the train to Pen Wylt—"Wild Head"—a station at the foot of the mountain ; and getting on his toe (as is the best way), crept gradually to his



VIEW OF BRECON.

walk to Talgarth ("Head of the Butress" it means), four miles along a lane-like road, lined with hedge-flowers, flanked by grass and cornfields, with the Beacons stretching out to our view whenever (almost) we turned our heads back, and the lake lying in front of them—a picture at every hundred yards. Why do not the landscape painters take up the Brecon Beacons? An artist would have, I think, some difficulty in getting along the four miles from Llangorse to Talgarth in less than half a day if he had his materials with him.

summit, again in some rain, but also in wind, and consequently with a varied class of effects—driving fleecy cloud, pelting showers, and intervals of gusty sunshine. It was not till on a subsequent morning we ascended Pen-y-Van again, on a breezy, bracing day, with none but fleecy clouds above, dry turf below, and a clear atmosphere all round, that our two novices—the "inconvenient boy" and the botanist—were converted to mountain worship, and vied in exulting proclamations of delightful enjoyment with the writer of these remarks.