

Press gleanings on Switzerland

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PRESS GLEANINGS on SWITZERLAND.

The Lötschen Valley.

"Piccadilly," July 20th.

The Lötschen Valley, in the Bernese Oberland, is one of the strangest regions of Europe. There, customs, modes of speech and fashions of dress exist in a state that has remained practically unaltered for five hundred years.

There the Middle Ages live on, quietly, eerily remote from the world of to-day, though the mouth of the valley lies but a few miles from some of the most famous winter and summer resorts of Switzerland.

Goppenstein, the little station at the southern end of the Lötschberg Tunnel, is the signpost to the valley. From there a road winds between the mountain spurs until, dramatically, two huge rock projections jut from either side to form a fitting gateway for the Lötschenthal.

For nearly six months of the year, Lötschen Valley lies locked in the snows of winter. But for the four vivid months of its summer, it makes up for this enforced seclusion. Every village of the valley has its little pageant of a religious procession on Saints' days. The children strew the most brilliant alpine wild blooms in the narrow alleys between the chalets.

Ferden, Kippel, Wiler, Ried, Eisten, Falleralp and Gletscherstafel—the Lötschen villages, lie like beads upon a string along the rugged track that winds beneath the very eaves of the mountains into the hidden heart of the Alps.

Excavations made in the Lötschen Valley reveal that, despite its secrecy and seclusion, some of its villages were inhabited in Roman times. There is reason to believe that these earliest dwellers there were legionaries of Caesar's armies who deserted, or became lost, during his famous crossing of the Alps.

Until about five years ago only a bridle path led to the valley, but this, for a good part of the way, has now been supplanted by a narrow but serviceable carriage road. The Lötschen home is a rough chalet whose one wide gently-sloping roof covers living quarters, stables, stores and hay lofts.

The men of the valley wear suits of dark-hued homespun and black felt hats. The dress of the women is almost sheer Tudor, with full black skirts reaching to the ankle, and a quaintly shaped close-fitting bonnet.

The *Lötschenthalers* live almost entirely on their own produce. Farming is done in the fertile patches between the grim mountain rocks. Wool is taken from sheep and goats, carded, spun and woven into cloth.

At first these shy, kindly peasants may be reticent towards a stranger. But they quickly "thaw" and show themselves to be among the most warm-hearted and hospitable in all Switzerland.

Aerial Alpinists.

"Dublin Evening Herald," July 22nd.

Passenger aeroplanes are to be used for the first time this summer in a regular sight-seeing service above the Jungfrau, Matterhorn, Eiger, Mont Blanc, and other famous peaks and glaciers of the Swiss Alps.

Capt. Mittelholzer, the well-known Swiss "ace," has been commissioned to pilot one of the planes, which are Fokker of the latest three-engine type.

In the event of the failure of one engine over the mountains the other two will be sufficient to carry it without any loss of height for a distance of 1,000 kilometres.

The flights will be organised from Zurich, and from the fine new aerodrome especially designed for aerial tourist traffic which has just been opened at Lucerne.

A Swiss Village School.

"Christian World," July 18th.

I have a very great admiration for the educational system of Switzerland—so far as my knowledge of it goes—just as I have for those of France and Germany. My strong impression is that for specialised training, whether on the humanistic or the scientific side, no nation can beat us; and again, that in primary education, especially in the London schools, we can bear comparison with any; but that somewhere in the middle we fail badly, and the level of general education among our middle-class folk is lamentably bad, as compared with that of the continental nations. I have never before had an opportunity of getting into a Swiss school because I have always come here in holiday

time—and I seized my chance. Without any introduction or appointment, I walked one morning into the school-house at Grindelwald and asked to see the head master; and I was more than rewarded. There is a freemasonry in every land among those who are interested in education; and Herr D. was most kind and courteous, answered all my questions, and gave me the freedom of his school for the rest of my stay. I made full use of it.

The school is what we should call a mixed secondary school. The ordinary school period in Switzerland is nine years, as ours is; but it is from six to over fifteen, instead of from five to over fourteen (our compulsory period). But there is practically no social distinction, at any rate among the younger ones; the child of the wealthy hotel-keeper learns alongside the shepherd's child. I had an impression that all education up to university standard was free in Switzerland; but I was wrong. It depends on the wealth of the local community. In the towns it is free, but here the fee is forty francs a year (£1 12s. 6d.) excluding books. There are five classes in this school, but only three masters; which means that frequently two classes, at two different stages, must be kept going at once, which is not an ideal arrangement. I was specially interested in the language teaching, because it is there that we British are so defective. I found that some of these boys and girls, none of whom were over fifteen-and-a-half, were learning three besides their mother-tongue, which is Swiss-German, and which is as different from pure German as, say, Dutch is. German and French are obligatory; English is optional, but almost every one of them takes it, and is moreover, intensely eager over it, as I saw for myself. I was delighted, until I was told the reason. Here in Grindelwald, no young person can expect to get into any situation in shop or hotel, or become a porter, or a cab-driver, or even a road-sweeper, without some knowledge of English!

I was allowed—even invited—to go to several English classes. Herr S., the master, spoke excellent English, and was familiar with English ways—he had spent a year or two in various parts of England and in London, and he had even bicycled from London to Edinburgh. (What energy and what initiative!) The children themselves delighted me. They were so fit, physically and mentally. The girls impressed me specially—some of them were really beautiful, with their dark eyes and their two long plaits of black hair. And they all worked so hard while they were at it, and I hardly think it could have been to impress me. Not that they were abnormal or priggish—they cribbed from each other at the blackboard in the most healthy way. From beginning to end, every word was in English—all the directions and corrections—and their accent was wonderfully good. I talked to them about London, and gave them all a general imitation (though I realized afterwards that the only "wonders" I had offered them were our black fogs and our traffic blocks). Finally, having congratulated them on their valiant and successful efforts to pronounce our difficult "th" sound, I brought the house down by reciting to them the famous tongue-twisting verse about "Theophilus Thistle, the thistle-sifter, who sifted a sieve of unsifted thistles." It was translated for them, and written on the board, and they copied it into their text-books, and I left them struggling with it, much hampered by attacks of laughter!

WATERWAYS of the 'SWISS SAHARA.'

Switzerland contains a semi-tropical desert—a region in which rain rarely falls, and which would be almost as barren as the Sahara but for an ingenious and fantastic system of artificial irrigation that has caused it to blossom like the rose, transforming its higher tracts into pastures and its lower levels into fertile vineyards and vegetable gardens.

This region is situated in the Valais plateaux lying at the foot of the snow peaks, high above the Rhone.

None of the water of the torrents finds its way on to these plateaux; it goes straight to the Rhone, roaring and foaming in the depths of gorges which are always precipitous and often inaccessible.

The region is, in short, a canyon country. Left to themselves, the plateaux and the slopes lying between the gorges would be barren wastes. Parts of the district, even now, present to the casual eye many of the characteristics of a desert only partially reclaimed. The problem is, and has been for hundreds of years, to tap and use the abundant water of the glacier torrents for the fertilization of the plateaux and slopes instead of letting it run to waste at the bottom of the canyons. That problem is solved by means of the remarkable artificial watercourses known as the *bisses*.

The very word *bisse* is probably quite new to many readers of this article: its etymology is uncertain. One may pay many visits to Switzerland without ever hearing of a *bisse*, though *bisses* have existed from a date lost in the mists of antiquity; but there is, at any rate, one *bisse*—and that a very striking one—which the tourist may visit without diverging very far from the beaten track.

He can pick it up at Montana, in the midst of a clump of trees, not very far from the big hotels; and he is likely to find it, even at that point, very different from any stream that he has ever seen before.

This watercourse is, perhaps eighteen inches broad and an equal number of inches deep, and is confined in an artificial channel as carefully banked as a canal. The water is icily cold, and quite opaque with dirt; even if the sun is shining on it, its surface refuses to sparkle. It flows silently, strongly, evenly, without a ripple; and in the gloom of the trees it has the weird effect of liquid swiftly-moving jet, or of a long black snake wriggling through the undergrowth.

Following the *bisse* through the pines, the tourist soon turns a corner and enters the canyon. Far below him, hidden from view by graduated pine-clad ridges, he can hear the glacier torrent storming its way to the Rhone; but his little aqueduct—filled, as he is presently to learn, from the melting snows of that same glacier—creeps along the face of the canyon, following all its bends, and turning innumerable corners, so that only a short stretch of it can be seen at any given moment. Beside it, but outside it, runs a footpath so narrow that two men could not possibly pass on it.

So far the foothold is good, and the drop is not sheer. Even if the position is a little suggestive of the tight-rope, there is nothing to make the normal healthy man feel giddy; but, as other corners are turned, the view alters and the difficulties begin.

The gorge is narrowing; its walls are becoming barer and more precipitous. At the point at which it was entered from the plateau, a man who tripped and fell off the narrow track would probably be able to arrest his descent by clutching at the dwarfed trees or shrubs growing on the ledges beneath him; but the vegetation gets scantier, the slopes steeper, and the ledges rarer. The sensation of tight-rope walking is intensified, and points are presently reached where the rocky cliff is so hard and steep that no channel for the water could be excavated in it.

Here a trough has been laid—such a trough as might be made by putting a number of packing cases end to end. This trough—always placed at a gradient which admits of the steady, but not too rapid, downward glide of the water—runs along the face of the precipice, being fastened to it by strong iron clamps. The place of the footpath, which necessarily comes to an end, is taken by a narrow plank, laid parallel with the trough and overhanging a profound abyss into which no living man has ever descended.

These are the *mauvais pas*—the bad passages—of the *bisses*. At first they are short and fairly easy to traverse, but gradually they become longer and more alarming—all the more alarming and perilous because the cliff in places, actually overhangs both the trough and the plank, so that even a man of medium height needs to stoop a little in order to get by.

The foothold is good enough unless, as sometimes happens, the plank is slimy or coated with ice. Mountaineers often walk on it boldly, using it as a short cut to the starting place for some ascent. Peasants, too, frequently descend along it from the higher pastures, carrying bulky loads of hay on their backs; but they have to be very careful. Every now and again, one of them failing to crouch low enough at some *mauvais pas*, unexpectedly brings his load of hay into collision with the overhanging cliff, is jerked off his feet and

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