

Notes and gleanings [continued]

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NOTES AND GLEANINGS.

By KYBURG.
CONTINUED.

Before the definite line could be built, it was necessary to construct a preliminary service line over which the heavier material could be transported. This was started in the autumn of the same year and presented extraordinary complications. First, in order to lodge the squadron of workers, spacious huts had to be erected at various points, and as there existed no track up the mountain, everything had to be carried on the backs of men.

This much achieved, a path was built for mules, as far as the declivity of the mountain would permit, and from there onwards a trail that could be used only by the men. Over the first part a regular army of mules brought up all the material not exceeding two hundred pounds in weight, but the more important pieces of machinery for the electrical plant had to be taken up by human labour, on account of their enormous weight.

Some of these required forty men, working daily for five weeks, to be hoisted four thousand feet up, while the cables for the preliminary line took a hundred and twenty-five men for an equal time. For this, every man had twenty-five feet of cable wound around him, weighing about a hundred pounds. Thus roped together in steel they made their slow, laborious ascent, often over rocks where a slip on the part of anyone would have meant death to the whole column, on account of the weight.

Difficult enough in itself, the portage was rendered far more difficult by the perpetual battle with the elements. The heavy snows in the high altitudes usually cease towards the end of June, to begin again about the middle of September. Even during these two and a half months of "fine" season, fresh snow falls frequently and requires a perpetual clearing of the narrow trails. With heavy autumn snows the situation became much more serious, and it was a struggle every moment to keep work under way. Bitter, shrieking winds, blinding snowstorms, not only obliterated the patient work of weeks, but often destroyed telegraph wires and consequently all communication between the advance posts.

Danger, however, came in the late spring, when the loosening of the frozen snowbanks brought about the dreaded avalanches. Crashing down from the high altitudes with a noise like thunder, they destroyed everything along their passage. Entire forests, blocks of cement, iron and steel were swept like straw before them, and much of the valuable material that had been dragged up the mountain with such effort was lost before it could reach proper shelter.

The effect of repeated struggle and defeat was demoralizing the men, who, although all natives of the mountain valleys, accustomed to hardship, found the rigour of their daily existence a *dolce far niente* in comparison with that of their new task. Only the example and the firm conviction in ultimate success of their leader made the accomplishment of this preliminary line possible.

From now on, the work advanced more rapidly, as practically all the material for the definite construction was brought up over the line.

Stations, power-houses, and even an hotel, sprung up suddenly in the unexplored wilderness.

This service funicular could not, however, solve the problem of transporting the great suspension cables for the permanent line, and this constituted, perhaps, the most difficult and risky part of the entire undertaking. As each cable weighed no less than twenty-four thousand kilos, that is twenty-four tons, they could not even be brought as far as Chamonix until all the bridges of the valley had been reinforced. To get them from there up the mountain-side, they had to be unwound, hoisted on to the steel pylons, and by means of smaller cables operated by the power-houses slowly dragged to their destination. Any hitch in the electric current, and rupture of the auxiliary cables under the immense strain, would have meant the fall of twenty-four tons from an actual height of five thousand feet, destroying in one sweep all the pylons of the line, taking a heavy toll of human life and ruining in a few seconds the labour of eight years.

Happily no such disaster occurred, and in 1924 the first section was completed. Although it had been begun as far back as 1909, work had been interrupted by the War and was not resumed until 1922. From then the work advanced rapidly, the section up to the Great Glaciers being inaugurated in the summer of 1927, while the third and last section is nearing completion. This will reach the height of twelve thousand eight hundred feet.

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The success of the line has been so great that it was decided to build another on the same principle on the opposite side of the valley. One cannot be on the Mont Blanc and at the same time enjoy the full beauty of Plampraz, six thousand feet up, one faces the entire massif, with all its needles and glaciers. The expanse which unfolds itself here, far more fully than from Chamonix, is one of the most imposing the Continent can offer.

This line, designed by Mr. de Blonay, was completed in 1929. It is in one section, the ascent being made in twelve minutes, in cars slightly larger than those of the Mont Blanc line.

The panoramic views, however, are far from being the only attraction of these aerial funiculars. In winter the plateau of Plampraz offers very fine skiing, while along the first section of the other line a bobsleigh run has been constructed, with the advantage that at the end of the run both bobsleigh and occupants can be transported in a few minutes to their point of departure and the fun begun all over again.

From an engineering standpoint there can be no comparison between the two lines, the chief interest being centred upon that of the Aiguille du Midi, which when completed will be not only the most daring, but by far the highest, funicular in the world.

In less than an hour from Chamonix it will attain almost thirteen thousand feet, covering in comfort and safety an ascent that has hitherto taken from two to three very strenuous days to accomplish.

From the summit only a short distance will separate the more enterprising from the highest peak of the Mont Blanc, and on that day, the Giant of the Alps will be almost within reach of everyone.

Distance, too, is being conquered and my readers are all familiar with the world-flights by aeroplanes, etc. I had a chat with a young flying friend of mine some days ago. He casually told me that after going home from his work in the City of London, where he is kept until fairly late in the evening, and after having finished his dinner, he would motor to Kenley Aerodrome and then fly to Yorkshire and back and be in bed, sound asleep before midnight. Well, this sort of thing makes me realise the possibilities of flying more than world-flights, because I am familiar, or though I was, with the localities and distances in question. At least, I know them, as measured by motoring values of distances and the aeroplane values of distance are found to be colossal different. Said my young friend the other day, quite casually too, when we were talking of some of England's beauty spots "Oh yes, the Lake District, of an evening when the sun is setting on a fine day, looks a picture, truly wonderful." I asked him how he knew, knowing he had never been there by rail or car and he told me that he had flown in that District several times, as well as over all the rest of England. "Of an evening" mind you!

Well now, the Lake District has been for years on my programme for a motor holiday. But it is fairly far away and I would need several days to do it comfortably. My friend does it, from south of London, "in an evening." Tableau.

However, writing of beauty spots of old England—and there are thousands to be sure—reminds me of another rather charming article I read in the *Liverpool Post and Mercury*, 16th July, which describes

Early Summer in the Prättigau.

Few English people come, in summer, to the Prättigau, and sometimes when they are in it they are not aware of the fact. They know they are in Klosters, the one tourist resort, and they stare abroad over the Prättigau in their walks, but they do not know that the valley which winds, before and below them, like a great ditch down to the Rhine and up to the Silvretta snows is the Prättigau. However, it is, and in early summer it is enchanting.

The first hay harvest in now in full swing in the Prättigau. All the way up from the Kluse, that gorge above Landquart, which is the entry to this long valley, the peasants are cutting, by hand, the flowery slopes, and the

sounds of scything and the warm scents of hay drift everywhere on the sunlight breeze.

On the steep slopes, tilted down towards the tempestuous, grey-green waters of the Landquart, women in bright blue overalls wind the hay into tall cocks round poles; men carry huge loads of it on their heads and store it in the log-walled barns, and men and women, barns and hay, are alike bronzed and saturated with sunshine. From the banks of the Landquart up past the villages, one thousand and two thousand feet above so that they look like patches of brown lichen on the vast slopes, the hay-making goes on, even in glades of the spruce forests, five thousand feet up, on the way to Davos.

There is still snow in the deep, wild hollows that run down to the Landquart; cherries that were scarlet along the Rhine are yet green up at Klosters; Cook's office is closed, and a black goat lies, ruminating, against its door; the village inns are astonished when English people demand, so early in the season, tea. Astonished, but welcoming, as at Mezzaselva, where the landlord hurries to lay the dust on the white road with a powerful jet from his hose; the landlord spreads a white cloth out under the beeches on the edge of the steep slope to the river; the daughter brings brötschen and honey and pale tea, and, in turns, the whole family come and converse politely in German, which is rather a strain on English intellects already bemused with sunshine and the intricacies of foreign tongues.

After dinner, when the few visitors now in Klosters walk up to the old church to look at the view and assist in the digestion of blue trout from the glacial rapids of the Landquart, the Prättigau lies before them, a great ditch winding, very mysterious, into the last glow of the sunlit day in their faces, murmur "Grütze" as they pass. Even to them the Prättigau has mystery, for though the spirits that once haunted its woodlands and the voices of lost souls that once chanted, on a certain midnight in autumn, from its high Alps, may be no more, there yet remain the incalculable forces of nature. Avalanche, flood, storm, and landslip have, time and again, swept the valley, carried away villages, set the Landquart raging over all the bottom lands, covered fields, and filled even modern hotel kitchens, with yards deep of mud and gravel. These things must happen again and so, after sunset, with the hordes of coming tourists still far beyond the western heights, the Prättigau seems a valley within itself eternally remote from man and withdrawn from his control. Then the bell in the old church tower sounds nine sonorous notes and the reflective tourist returns to his lounge and there, an island in an acre of polished floor, reads, but pensively, the "Liverpool Post" of the day before.

Well now, what did I write last week about feeling envious?

A "PICNIC" BY CAR.

The suggestion made in my last issue has had a very gratifying response. So far six cars will participate. The party will meet to-morrow, Sunday, morning at 9.15 on Ham Common (near Petersham on the road from Richmond to Kingston) and take the Surrey route to Brighton. From there it will proceed to Saltdean (about one mile east of Rottingdean) where we hope to arrive at midday. High-water being early in the morning it is intended to spend the remainder of the day on this delightful beach.



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