

The battle of St. Jacob on the Birs

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THE BATTLE OF ST. JACOB ON THE BIRS.

(26 August, 1444)

(A poem by "Gallus" published in the
SWISS OBSERVER, 28 July, 1944).

When Zürich was invested and civil war was rife,
She sought from mighty Austria assistance in her
strife.

The Swiss sent out their foot-troops, they marched
toward the Rhine,
Laid siege to Farnsburg castle, stronghold of
Falkenstein.

Whilst Frederick, the Emp'ror, looked westward where
that day
All powerful and dreaded, the King of France held
sway.

Commanded by the Dauphin, his host of Armagnacs
Should bring to heel those yokels who'd dared such rash
attacks.

The allies' aim was Basel, a proud and wealthy town,
They'd raise the siege of Zürich and strike the en'my
down,
Destroy and smash his forces wherever he may stand,
Then conquer, aye, and plunder that much desired land.

As dull and grey the morning dawned on a sultry night
The Dauphin's mighty army from Sundgau hove in
sight.
Soon Muttenz fell and Pratteln, helpless against the
foe,
An easy prey seemed Basel, she'd fall without a blow.

Meantime the Swiss were marching, the river Birs they
crossed,
Expecting but a vanguard, o'ercome at little cost.
Instead it was the main force they found, to their
dismay,
As David faced Goliath, so now they stood at bay.

At this the en'my gloated, his hopes indeed ran high,
There seemed no need to worry about such paltry fry.
The Swiss took earnest counsel, they weighed the heavy
odds :
" We'll give the foe our bodies, our souls, howe'er, are
God's ".

A grim and bloody struggle raged till the noontide sun
Shone as the foreign legions swarmed o'er the ground
they'd won.

At last the Swiss retreated, contesting ev'ry pace,
They fought like angry lions and suffered no disgrace.

St. Jacob, wayside chapel and hospital beside,
By solid walls surrounded, a strongpoint did provide.
Within, the Swiss found cover, these weary men, hard
pressed,
Where they could tend their wounded, refresh them-
selves and rest.

But shortlived was the respite, for soon the wall was
breached,
The Armagnacs surged forward, the danger point was
reached.
Yet worse was still to follow, the en'my's fire grew
And set ablaze the buildings, the scorching flames swept
through.

The gallant Swiss were striving to stem the dreadful
flood,
But many of them perished, gave willingly their blood.
While others, nothing daunted, although their halberds
broke,
Continued grimly fighting amidst the fire and smoke.

For though the hafts were splintered, these halberds,
used with skill
As makeshift battle-axes, were deadly weapons still.
And other deeds of valour does History report :
How arrows from their bodies they tore when theirs ran
short.

How, not content with trying their stronghold to
defend,
They launched repeated sallies, the en'my's line to
bend.
Great were the French troops' losses, by thousands
were they slain,
Till they became disheartened, their efforts seeming
vain.

But as the day was waning, Von Rechberg's troops
drew near,
The Armagnacs, thus strengthened, forgot their tran-
sient fear.
The Swiss, well nigh exhausted, few being whole and
sound,
Determined and unyielding, held stubbornly their
ground.

A knight, 'twas Munch von Landskron, in shining
armour plate,
Approached the crumbling ruins, beheld the broken
gate
And as he, high on horseback, the bloody field surveyed :
" To-day we bathe in roses " with scornful laugh he
said.

At which one of the warriors within that stricken place
Picked up a jagged wall-stone and hurled it in his face.
" Here ", cried he, " feed on roses ". — He'd thrown
it with such force
That, stunned, the haughty rider fell dying from his
horse.

Reduced to but two hundred, those heroes gave not way,
Unflinching and unconquered, they held the French at
bay.
Whilst of the Dauphin's army eight thousand men were
lost,
His confidence was shaken, too great he found the cost.

For him the fight was over, he sounded the retreat,
He cannot now reach Basel, he dare not court defeat.
A treaty signed soon after in Alsace close at hand
At last brought peace with honour into the war-torn
land.

Now, after five long cent'ries, St. Jacob points anew
What fortitude, devotion and faithfulness can do.
When on these deeds we ponder, our hearts with wonder
fill
And praised be God Almighty that Switzerland lives
still.

—(Translated by J.J.F.S.)