

This is my Switzerland

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THIS IS MY SWITZERLAND.

By FRED A WHITTAKER.

(Reproduced from the July issue of "The Millgate" by courtesy of the Editor.)

"Switzerland?" said the blasé traveller, pouring cold water on our enthusiasm for this country of blue-green lakes and mountains with icing sugar tops — "Oh, it's too commercialised."

We knew just what he meant — popular centres, hotels full of one's fellow English, high prices, everything bearing the tourist hall mark. We knew, too, just what he had missed. This wasn't *our* Switzerland at all. We had memories of *fondue* parties with Swiss friends, toboggan runs by starlight; being given, as a great honour, cheese twenty years old, in a remote Alpine village, at a café restaurant.

We shall never forget that café restaurant. Madame, rubicund and knowing no word of English, welcomed us exuberantly in French and German, showed us the house and all its amenities. Madame's daughter settled down to what looked like a thorough spring cleaning, while Madame herself prepared an evening meal.

What a dinner! There was the cheese, which was reverently unwrapped. There were stewed *champignons morilles* — a special mushroom found in the woods — there were feathery omelets, and whipped cream, and there was the soup. This was Madame's *chef d'œuvre*, compounded of salad leaves peculiar to the district, and dressed with an equally unusual native sauce. We could see it was a point of honour both to eat and appreciate it.

But men are notoriously conservative over their food, and the man in our party was no exception. One taste and he laid down his spoon. Then, conscious that he was letting the whole English race down, he suddenly had a desperate inspiration. He quickly emptied his dish back into the tureen. Only a minute later Madame entered, and beamed approvingly on our empty plates.

The latest of our Swiss expeditions took us on a completely unplanned holiday, knapsacks on back, and but little money in our pockets. We took the Milan train down the Rhone valley as far as Sierre. There,

in the hot sunshine of this charming little town set amid its terraced vineyards, we waited for the post bus for Grimentz. Nice and sensible are the Swiss Alpine buses — all the luggage goes into a neat trailer, and the passenger enjoys a comfortable seat unencumbered.

Our fellow travellers were country folk returning to their mountain homes — mothers with prim little girls in pinafores frocks and stout boots, young couples, elderly men and women. Everyone knew everyone else.

We were off, up the tortuous Ponti highway, each snake-like curve taking us higher and higher, unrolling the Rhone valley for our delectation.

Those bends! We assumed a sang-froid we were far from feeling. We clutched our seat arms. We watched the world fall down, down, a drop of thousands of feet between our precipice edge and the now distant valley. Every time we came to a bend the bus horn sent its musical notes echoing into sunlit space, and we held our breath as the corner was rounded.

Once we encountered a car, once a cyclist. At these moments we almost shut our eyes, expecting someone to hurtle over the edge. But nothing happened. The other passengers continued their pleasant chatter, and finally we found ourselves drawn into conversation.

In halting French we announced our destination, and explained we were taking pot luck. It was all settled in a few minutes. An elderly man recommended



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friends who had a pension — clean, inexpensive, and good food; we would be satisfied.

We were. Our bedroom window in this large wooden chalet looked out on to a green pasturage with a backcloth of forest and mountain — no millionaire could have "bought" a lovelier view. Next morning we breakfasted at 5.30. Our landlady provided us with hard-boiled eggs, little bags of tea, cheese, and bread, and at six of a clear June morning we set off to climb to the Glacier de Moiry.

We clattered down the cobbled street overhung by old, balconied chalets, and came to the woods beside the tumbling river, and exclaimed at the masses of Alpine roses. We climbed past the dense forests, past the tree line. The great mountains closed in, shut out the sun. Then, over the Col, what a giant panorama! Great white peaks slashed the blue sky; the milky, rushing river, overhung by an ice bridge, sparkled with a million water diamonds; the pale emerald ice of the glacier was lit by the sun.

We found ourselves in a natural Alpine garden, gay with fuchsia coloured primulas, yellow globe flowers, blue gentians, violet pansies, purple saxifrage, white orchises, heartease, the golden potentilla, and highest of all, the blue veined, white anemones, the lilac soldenella, and the crocus. By that time we had reached the snow line, crossed the dazzlingly bright snow-field, and stood at the foot of the glacier — a vast ice-field descending in serrated lines, cut deep by crevasses, the turbulent river finding its source in the milky green lake at the glacier edge.

From this 8,000 foot level we began our descent, and when we emerged from the forest track below Grimentz, en route for Zinal, the sun had dropped. We came to the tiny hamlet of Mottec, ancient chalets strung beside the fields and the river, and decided we could go no further.

Getting a bed proved difficult. For one thing, the Swiss are particular about maintaining their high standard of accommodation, and ordinary people are not allowed to take in visitors haphazard, as in this country. For another, the inhabitants of Mottec had only moved up from the Rhone valley with their mule carts, their cattle and goats, and their household belongings, three days ago, and were still putting their Alpine homes to rights.

Finally, the old man who was head of the commune took matters in hand — there was just a chance that Monsieur M. could arrange something — he was busy at the moment with his cows.

Monsieur M. had a wooden hut beside his old chalet, which he was allowed to let out to Swiss tourists, and he let us use it for the night. He could give us milk and hot water, but no food. Next morning he offered to take us in his mule cart to Ayer. But we wanted to walk on to Zinal first. Thereupon he took our bulging knapsacks, told us they would be waiting for us at the hotel in Ayer, and we could settle up with him there.

We wandered down to tiny Prazlonzet, its wide meadows river threaded. Here, the men were repairing the water culverts, the women were busy inside their wooden houses, where window ledges were gay with Alpine roses. The children, little girls, knitting in hand, were keeping an eye on the dark brown cows and the dainty white goats, all of them filling the air with the music of their tinkling bells.

In Ayer, perched on its green hilltop, its home-steads clustered round the cream church, we came to the hotel, sat in the sun, and ate poached eggs, for we were extremely hungry. Our host of the previous night, we discovered, was also the hotel proprietor, and beside the attractive hotel was a well-stocked shop run by his wife. Swiss people do not flaunt their possessions — one may be a keeper of cows and wear shabby clothes, and at the same time own a good portion of forest and probably a vineyard or two in the valley, as well.

Our modest bill was settled, and we were not allowed to pay for the transport of our luggage. We took the winding track down to the valley, and came upon miles and miles of strawberry fields, where the peasant women, their heads protected from the hot sun by their black, broad-brimmed Valaisan hats, were picking the fruit. Eagerly we stopped, and got two large bags filled to overflowing, for a franc.

We ate and ate, and such is the irony of fate, finally could not bear the sight of strawberries any more, and gave the remainder to some children minding the family goats. In Sierre, we treated ourselves to a good lunch at a good hotel.

The service was impeccable, the food excellent. The proprietor enquired solicitously if we were satisfied. Finally we came to the sweet — we felt, after the delicious soup, the mushroom stew, the omelet, this last course would be a *piece de resistance*.

So it was — but not quite in the sense we had anticipated. With smiling face the waitress set before us — more strawberries!

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