

Gotthard journey

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GOTTHARD JOURNEY.

(Reprinted from the "Young Traveller in Switzerland" by Mariann Meyer, published by Phoenix House, Ltd., at 7/6, by courtesy of the Publishers and kind permission of the Editor.)

From Bellinzona John travelled comfortably the next day over one of the most famous of all Swiss railway routes. The sub-tropical vegetation was left behind and he was in alpine country again. The train seemed to thread its way through a veritable maize as it climbed up the wild, rock-strewn valley. The last Mulberry-trees disappeared, there were fewer walnut-trees, and vines no longer trailed their foliage over stone pillars and trellises. The mountains rose on both sides and the valley narrowed at times to rocky gorges. Through one of these gorges the River Ticino hurled itself on its way south into the Lago Maggiore, and there were many waterfalls.

The line described an astonishing pattern of loops and zigzags, partly through tunnels, as it worked its way upwards. At Airolo the train entered the nine-and-a-quarter-mile Gotthard tunnel, second in length only to the Simplon tunnel. It dropped 115 feet from Airolo to Göschenen and passed under a glacier.

'Work was started in 1872 from both sides', a fellow-passenger told John. 'Eight years later the workmen met half-way. They had had to tunnel through all kinds of stone — schist, granite, serpentine, and dolomite, and, twice, the enormous pressure made the roof cave in.'

'The most powerful electric locomotive in the world, 12,000 horse-power, is used on the Gotthard route,' the passenger's companion added. 'An automatic signal station has been recently installed half-way through the tunnel.' It was not until the three had been talking for some time and John mentioned that he was returning to friends in Zurich that they discovered Herr Huber was a mutual friend.

'My name is Tschudi and I live at Lucerne. Would Herr Huber have mentioned me perhaps? At the moment I'm on my way to Andermatt. Would you like to see it? Could you possibly come if I send a telegram to Herr Huber to explain that you will arrive on a later train?'

John hesitated for only a moment. A few hours' delay would not prevent him from being in Zurich when his father arrived.

His invitation accepted, Herr Tschudi introduced his companion, Herr Häberli, as his assistant, he himself being a surveyor.

It took seventeen minutes to get through the tunnel. They left the train at Göschenen and set out to walk up the wild valley of the Reuss. Great bare rocks rose on both sides of the turbulent river. In the Ticino that very morning the sun had smiled benignly from a cloudless sky on a serene landscape, but here it was cold and they had hardly left the village behind when it started to snow.

Herr Tschudi led the way on the old St. Gotthard pass route.

'Which Canton are we in now?' John asked.

'Uri. You said you had been to Flüelen on the lake of Lucerne, I think? It's all the same Canton.'

'The St. Gotthard pass has been a famous road across the Alps for centuries', Herr Tschudi said presently. 'Until 1775 it was just a bridle path, and packhorses were the only means of transport. In that year, however, it was crossed for the first time by a carriage, which was driven by an Englishman named Greville.'

'But there were horse-drawn mail coaches over the Gotthard, weren't there?'

'Not until some time after Greville's venture. Now, of course, the easiest way to cross the Gotthard is by railway.'

They were now tramping steadily between giant granite rocks that shut them in on both sides of the

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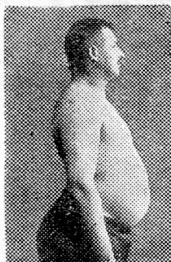
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valley, and following the tremendous hairpin bends through the famous Schöllenen gorge, which is nearly three miles long. For some time they had heard the sound of waterfalls ahead and it gradually became a roar. Then suddenly they turned a corner and there was the granite Devil's Bridge, spanning a terrific abyss where the river Reuss fell in a seething torrent over the cliffs. They crossed the bridge and the road took them through a tunnel in the rocks about seventy yards long. When they emerged it was to a different landscape, and John had a sense of relief. Instead of harsh jagged rocks and frowning cliffs they saw the peaceful Urseren valley spread out in front of them, its grassy expanse now covered in white.

The snow became thicker and the granite pylons marking the road were only just visible. The three came into Andermatt very shortly afterwards and went to an inn for lunch.

'The three pass routes — the Furka from Gletsch, the St. Gotthard from the Ticino, and the Oberalp from the Grisons — meet at Andermatt', Herr Tschudi explained. 'The St. Gotthard range is the centre of the Swiss Alps — a big group of granite rocks that are our most important fortresses.'

After lunch John and Herr Häberli sat talking in the snug *Gaststube*, the inn parlour, while Herr Tschudi went on his business. He told John that the Gotthard zone was notorious for heavy avalanches. There were often several hundred a year.

'Why are there so many here in particular?' John asked.

'They're started by a wind which we call the

Föhn. It's characteristic of Switzerland, and the result of the tremendous differences in air pressure either side of the Alps.'

The return journey was heavy going, for the snow was nearly a foot deep. Herr Tschudi walked ahead, and John followed in his footsteps. They tramped in silence through the gorge back to Göschenen. There wasn't much breath left for talking. There they boarded the Gotthard express at about five o'clock and gladly settled into the comfortable seats. They had had enough walking for the time being.

Just before they rushed into the spiral loop tunnels at Wassen they caught a glimpse of the village church far below in the valley. The tunnel described a complete circle inside the mountain, descending all the time. They came out for a moment and found they were level with the church, then they were in the tunnel again. Next time they emerged the Wassen church was well above them and so were the bridges and the steel pylons carrying the overhead wires of the railway line where they had just come from.

The valley became wider, but it was still wild, and to reach the lake of Lucerne they travelled along a narrow ledge close to foaming waterfalls and through more tunnels. The line ran along the sunny shore of the lake's southern arm, mostly in short tunnels which formed the famous Axenstrasse with its openings cut out of the rock. John got a fleeting glimpse of the Rütli. He left Herr Tschudi and Herr Häberli at Brunnen on the last part of his journey to Zurich.

Werner was at the station to meet him.

'I say, aren't you *brown*!' he said.

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