

# Mountain climbing

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This is not merely a phrase. In Switzerland, the citizens are called upon to take a decision on most of the social laws. The legislator cannot reduce the number of working hours, or increase the benefits paid by social insurance, without the express approval of the majority of the citizens.

Although the Federation of Trade Unions is the most important of the employees' organisations in the country, possessing as it does more than 430,000 members, it only includes a little more than one-third of the total number of wage-earners. Concurrently, other employees' organisations number approximately 220,000 adherents. It will be observed that, taken as a whole, only four wage-earners out of ten in Switzerland belong to trade unions. This means that a large proportion of employees benefit passively from the efforts of the trade union movement. The non-organised employees enjoy, in the same way as the trade union members, the improvements brought to social legislation and institutions as a result of the efforts of the trade union movement.

No objective exigency would appear to justify this dispersion of Swiss trade unionism, particularly as the progressive attenuation of the differences existing between employees and executives makes it no longer necessary to have two distinct organisations. But, perhaps the tradition of trade union pluralism is more in conformity with our federalism than is the trade union unity which has been realised in Austria, Great Britain, Sweden, West Germany and elsewhere.

## MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

By W. STETTbacher

After my traverse of the Matterhorn last summer, I had tentatively arranged with my guide, M. René Marcoz, of Verbier to visit this summer the region of the Gran Paradiso, Italy, and perhaps also to scale one or two of the famous Aiguilles (Needles) in the Mont Blanc region.

The poor summer of this year made this a particularly fortunate choice, because the Aosta Valley is well known for its dry climate with record hours of sunshine. My eyes were focused on the two best-known Peaks in this area, the Gran Paradiso, 4,061 metres high, and the Grivola, just under 4,000 metres. I have seen these two giants many times from a great distance when standing on the summits of the "Viertausender" of the Wallis, and they also figure prominently in Alpine history.

I left London in the night of 14th July, flying in one of the legendary Comets. To watch the fast and steep take-off after a short run, the rapid climb to a great height by the surge of jet power that lifts the plane smoothly, the high cruising speed of 865 kilometres at a height of 28,000 feet, was in itself a unique experience. Other travellers were going through the customary routine, i.e., apéritifs, cold meal, which I find unattractive, particularly at 3 a.m., purchases of duty-free cigarettes, liqueurs, etc., but I preferred to watch the ever changing scene below, culminating in the rise of the sun on the distant horizon.

I was going to join my guide at Bourg St. Pierre on the following Sunday morning. I passed the night from Saturday to Sunday in this small mountain village, near the Great St. Bernhard Pass, to get acclimatised to the higher altitude, and to see a former guide of mine who lives there, and with whom I made some great climbs nine and ten years ago. The declining number of tourists had forced him to give up this occupation in favour of a steady and gainful job with a local hydro-electric works. I had intended to stay at the Hotel Napoleon, where the great Emperor once slept, but declining tourist trade had resulted in its closure a few years ago. I was referred to an excellent nearby "Pension de Famille".

On Sunday morning, in glorious weather, I greeted my guide on arrival of the first Motor Coach of the Swiss Post, which was to take us over the Great St. Bernhard Pass to Aosta. Below the summit of the Pass, on the Swiss side, we passed the entrance of the new Traffic Tunnel, on which work is now in progress.

On the summit of the Pass, with its world-famous Hospice and Hotel, we made a customary halt of about 20 minutes. Near by stands the monument of the patron saint of mountaineers. A temple of Jupiter stood at this spot when the Roman Empire was at its zenith.

The Great St. Bernhard Pass is one of the most famous of all Alpine Passes. To-day, the Hospice of St. Bernhard is mainly known for the St. Bernhard Dogs romping about, and for the athletic looking Monks looking after them, but already Caesar used this Pass, and many great Emperors from Charles the Great up to Napoleon went this way. For Kings and Emperors, this crossing was merely an episode on their way to history; but for their soldiers, who followed with difficulty, the steep paths over unaccustomed heights were a way of terror, and when they at last reached Aosta and civilisation after a descent of more than 2,000 metres (in height), many must have felt to be near death. After this terror of the Alps, they were hardly fit to worry about the terrors of the battlefields, to which they were led by their Emperors.

Even in our times, a difference in height of 2,000 metres will strongly affect a human being. One feels such a difference, no matter whether one goes on foot or in a Cadillac. It is not only necessary to get acclimatised to heights, but also to lower lands. The descent from the summit of a Pass like the Great St. Bernhard is nevertheless one of the most impressive alpine experiences.

About 600 yards below the summit, we passed the Italian frontier post, and following some very steep zig-zags we motored down past the exit of the new Tunnel, and through some charming villages like Etroubles, St. Rhemy.

The Aosta Valley has justifiably been given the name of the "Pearl of the Alps". It covers about 3,240 square kilometres and has over 100,000 inhabitants. Although it is part of Italy, it has a certain amount of political autonomy. It is an imposing valley through which the Dora Baltea flows and from which to right and left branch thirteen lateral valleys, with a vast frame of the highest mountains of Europe.

From the central valley, attractive for its smiling towns and villages, for its castles and monuments of every period, one can

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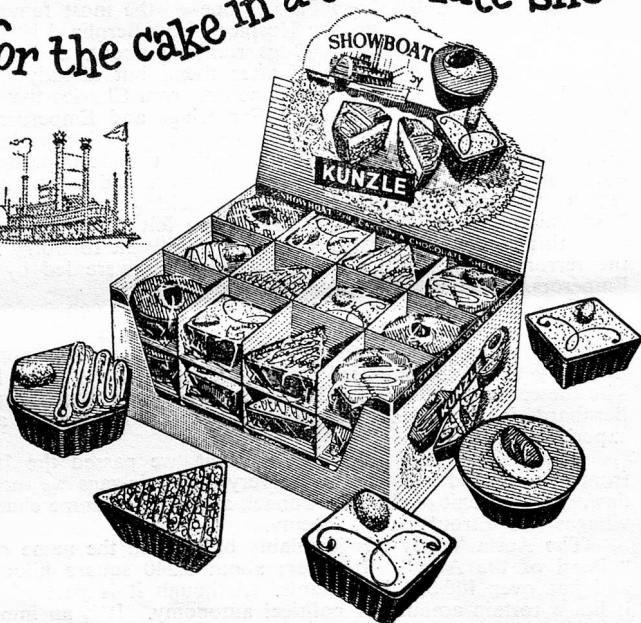
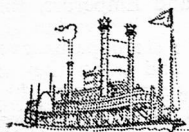
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mount to side valleys and reach such fashionable and famous resorts as St. Vincent or Courmayeur, the latter at the foot of the Mont Blanc, international centre of mountaineering, with ice, snow and rock climbs of every description, to Breuil (now called Cervinia) within sight of the Matterhorn, to Gressoney, at the foot of the Monte Rosa, to Cogne in the centre of the National Park of the Gran Paradiso, the home of Bouquetins and Chamois.

In these imposing surroundings, there is ancient tradition and interesting folk-lore, colourful and attractive costumes, and hardy mountain folk who speak not only Italian and French, but also German in the Gressoney valley, as well as the dialects of their ancestors, who were mostly guides and hunters.

In this valley, Man and Nature seem to have co-operated in this immense setting with its crags and pastures sloping into the valleys. The area is pervaded by an atmosphere of remoteness and changelessness, blended with an air of civilisation and progress. The arches of the bold cable railways (here there are some of the highest in the world) look like hinges on these crags and glaciers. There are mountains with a tragic aspect like the Grandes Jorasses, while others are crystal pinnacles.

The climate is exceptionally good. There is an absence of mists and fogs, while the skies may be clear, with the deepest blue, for weeks, if not months, both in summer and winter. The central valley has the reputation of being one of the driest in Italy.

The capital of the valley, Aosta, is an important tourist and industrial centre. There are big steel and iron works there, and from a great distance away enormous clouds of industrial smoke can nearly always be seen hanging over the town. Aosta was founded as far back as 24 B.C., and it still preserves the ark of those times, while the lively markets in the town centre attract a multitude of the valley dwellers. The town is full of architectural monuments which attract great numbers of tourists, and it seems more like a small capital city than the chief town of a valley.

It is to the South of Aosta that the great National Park of the Gran Paradiso is situated. The image of the "earthly paradise" is even in the Bible associated with a mountain, and it is certainly not by accident that one of the most beautiful groups of mountains in the Italian Alps, and of all the Alps, rightly bears the name of "Gran Paradiso". This popular name, which has been in existence for centuries, always expresses instinctive beliefs in the major virtue of the higher powers. It is also true that high above the factories and mists of the plains of the Po, and the noise and hustle of the crowds affected by so-called progress, these snowclad architectures are always sending their message of peace, light and serenity.

This region was formerly a hunting preserve for the Italian kings, but thanks to the efforts of some far-seeing people, including the Italian kings, this vast area of mountains and valleys (nearly as big as, say, the Canton of Zurich) is now a preserve and the property of the Italian nation. It is one of the last bulwarks behind which real nature is hidden or sheltered. These peaks of the Gran Paradiso are not only a dream of crystal, but they are also harbouring life, in the most immediate and concrete manner. They are looking after, and are protecting, thousands of creatures which are elsewhere hunted or annihilated.

Perhaps the most beautiful ornament in this Park is the bouquetin (or ibex or wild goat), with its crescent-shaped horns with the knots measuring the years. These fascinating animals can be seen roaming about in hundreds; they are antique witnesses of human adventure, for their silhouettes appear in engravings 20,000 years old. But the presence of these animals is almost a miracle. Decimated for centuries by hunting, because they were much in demand for culinary magical and other reasons, these bouquetins were saved only by the energetic intervention of fair-minded people. It may be the place here to point out the differences between the chamois (of which there are at least 3,000 in this Park), which are well-known, and the bouquetins, which are less known. The former are probably an intermediary between antelopes and goats which emigrated to higher regions during the glacial period. The latter are a type of wild goat perfectly adapted to rock and difficult terrain. Apart from the obvious differences in the horns, one can readily see that the bouquetins are moving more slowly and more deliberately, giving the impression of great strength and of a certain slowness, but the latter is illusory, for its capacity to cross the most difficult passages is equal to that of the chamois. In any case, the ibex is tougher, and can live and exist at high altitudes, during the biting winds of the late autumn, when the chamois have already been forced to seek refuge in the forests.

It would seem that the bouquetin is a more intelligent animal than the chamois. The latter, while also a fine animal, is timid, continuously on the look-out for trouble, will panic at any time,



and for the slightest reason. The bouquetin, on the other hand, will always reflect before doing anything, and move with ponderation, and will personify calmness the moment it concludes that the human-beings have no aggressive intentions. It will then content itself to keep politely but firmly to a certain distance, about 20 metres, giving one almost a cheeky look, but always regulating its tempo to that of the human being, without appearing to do so. I have not heard this myself, but I am told that the animal shows its bad humour by blowing three or four whistles through its large nose.

Another interesting and most intelligent animal to be found here is the marmotte. They live in colonies at an altitude of between 1,500 and 3,000 metres, and as habitations they prefer slopes looking towards east or south, with sufficient reserves of vegetation and grass. It is here that they dig deep burrows, at the bottom of which they sleep in winter.

The marmottes build living quarters both for the bad winter season and for the more attractive summer season, consisting of various apartments with several exits, a lot of gangways, sleeping quarters, and even lavatories! They have a social life of their own; for instance, individual marmottes relieve each other to stand on guard and to warn the colony on the approach of danger. The alarm signal consists of a series of shrill whistles which also warns other animals. They mutually aid each other to make their holes and to lay in hay just as the farmers do it 1,000 metres lower down. They cut the grass with their sharp teeth, allow it to dry on the ground, and then take it inside their burrows in order to make hot and dry beds for their long winter sleep.

In the endless sky, eagles and falcons are spreading their large wings, remainder of an epoch which reminds us of the ice age.

There are also foxes, ermines, and snakes in this National Park, and if one is patient enough to wait, one can also see partridges and pheasants, while the rivers are full of trout.

The flora is immensely rich, and this area is also known for its magpies and other birds, and for its multicoloured butterflies.

We arrived in Aosta at about 12 o'clock, and had lunch at the Hotel Suisse. My guide arranged with the owner of the hotel to have a taxi ready to take us the same afternoon to Pont (1,960 metres), which is a holiday resort near the end of the Valsavaranche valley. It is 40 kilometres from Aosta, and the starting point for the climb of the Gran Paradiso, 4,061 metres, the highest peak completely Italian. The road leading to Pont is very narrow and rough, and the only way to reach this resort is either on foot or by car or taxi. Until the new road is constructed, there is no bus service. At the beginning, the Valsavaranche valley is very narrow, with mountains rising on each side, and severely alpine in character. After a 2½-hour ride in the taxi we reached Pont, in brilliant weather, and set out at once for the Refuge Victor Emmanuel, 2,732 metres.

Our path took us at first through pine forests, in which at least a thousand Italian troops were camping, apparently on manoeuvres. A military band was practising and playing martial tunes in the best Italian tradition. To reach the Refuge we had to walk up a record number of 150 zig-zags, which were mostly very short. We quickly gained height, and with each step the view became grander. High above us we saw eighteen other climbers proceeding in single file, and on catching up with them we found to our pleasant surprise that they were members of the Swiss Alpine Club, Albis section. The Refuge was reached in less than two hours; it has an enormous round steel roof, and can give shelter to as many as 150 tourists. We were surprised to be welcomed by a woman guardian; it soon became evident that the place was efficiently managed, and that the five girls working for her were well disciplined and efficient. The dinner was as good as in any hotel, and the price, which in any case is fixed by the Italian Alpine Club, is moderate.

The guardians of Alpine Huts (or Refuges) are normally appointed by the Alpine Clubs in the countries which own them. In Switzerland, all guardians are men, although their wives and children usually give them a hand. In Italy, both the Rifugio Vittorio Emanuele and the Rifugio Sella were in the charge of women. In Switzerland, either the job of a guardian runs in the family, i.e., son succeeds father, or guides who have reached the end of their active career are appointed.

It is extremely strenuous work, and, in view of the constant coming and going of tourists, a guardian is lucky if he gets four or five hours' sleep. He may have to get up as early as 2 a.m., to wake up guides and climbers, and to prepare a simple breakfast for them. Around 6 a.m., when the last climber has left the hut, he will go back for a few hours' sleep, but has to resume work around 11 a.m., when the first climbers will have returned and be in need of refreshments. From now on there will be fresh arrivals from the valley down below. From then until

9 p.m., he and his assistants will be engaged most of the time in cooking or making tea, cutting wood for fuel, washing up, and collecting water — which may have to be carried a long distance or, in the case of huts at a great altitude, even have to be melted from snow.

Dormitories, with their mattresses and blankets, also have to be kept in order. There are usually several dormitories; some are reserved for guides or for members of Alpine Clubs, while in others, members of both sexes and non-members and members of Alpine Clubs freely mix together.

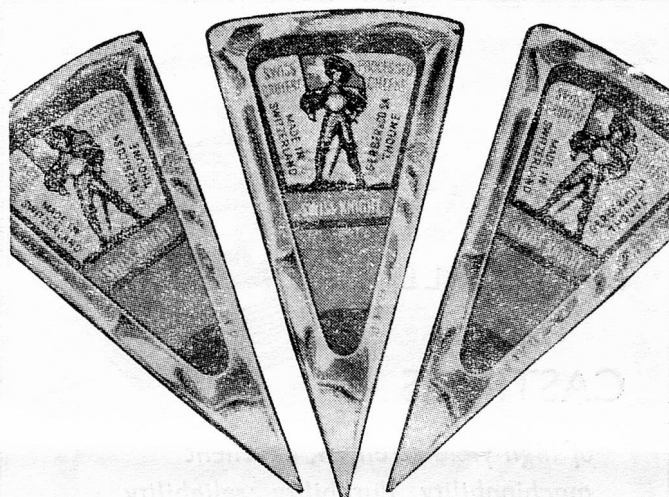
*(To be concluded in next issue.)*

## COCKTAIL PARTY

The Counsellor of the Swiss Embassy and Madame Jean-Jacques de Tribolet gave a cocktail party to members of the Swiss Colony on Sunday, 6th November 1960, at The Dorchester, Park Lane, W.1, to meet Federal Councillor F. T. Wahlen, Vice-President of the Swiss Confederation.

## GALA PRESENTATION

The Managers of the Regional and Local Tourist Offices and Railway Companies of the Bernese Oberland, and the Manager of the Swiss Dining Car Company, gave a Gala Presentation, "Under Swiss Skies", including a Winter Sports Fashion Show by Simpson of Piccadilly, on Wednesday, 2nd November 1960, at the Planetarium, Marylebone Road, N.W.1.



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