

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

When I first visited Switzerland some years ago, I enjoyed walking. This had less to do with athletic inclination than with my personal financial status at the time. I simply preferred walking to starving, and if I had spent more money on riding around the place, I would have eaten less. This may sound complicated to those who have never led the free, easy life of a student in Switzerland, but to me it was a question of pure economics.

As I slowly began to climb life's ladder rung by rung, I soon obtained my first conveyance: a gleaming Swiss bicycle. It was a fine bicycle, and it served me well, even though I was rather uncertain of myself in traffic. At night, I parked my bicycle in a little alleyway next to the house where I lived. In the morning it was still there, sometimes covered with a light dew, sometimes not. But the point is, it was always there. I occasionally locked my bicycle in the beginning, but after a while I didn't bother anymore. There were two reasons for this: first, I wasn't so convinced that such a simple lock on the back wheel would discourage a genuine bicycle thief; and, second, the lock eventually got rusty and ceased to function properly. I was shocked that a Swiss bicycle lock would ever get rusty, but when I examined it, I discovered that it was manufactured in Liverpool.

I was concerned at first that someone would walk – or ride – off with my beloved bicycle, once they discovered it was not locked up for the night. But it was always there in the morning, covered with dew (and sometimes not).

The question of why that bicycle was always there in the morning began to fascinate me. Could it be that the Swiss were just not interested in stealing bicycles, or was there a special Swiss law which was especially hard on bicycle thieves. I began to experiment.

One day I bought a book and left it on the rack on the back of my bicycle. I left it overnight, and it was there in the morning. I left it the next night, and it was still there. I left it a third night. When I looked for it the next morning, it was gone. "Happy days!" I exclaimed to myself, "the Swiss are indeed capable of stealing things!"

But then I noticed the book on the pavement behind the bicycle. It had simply grown tired of all this experimentation business and had fallen off its precarious perch on the bicycle rack.

I began to worry about the Swiss, to wonder just what was wrong with them. I studied the newspapers to see what other crimes these perfect people were likewise not perpetrating. My favorite newspaper at the time was the *Neue Basler Bratwurst* – for I was living in Basel – and it had a small daily section dealing with crime. But, in all honesty, there were very few crimes of any importance, with the exception of an occasional murder or two, many of which seemed to occur in intimate family circles.

I continued my experiments. The book on the bicycle soon became a pound of coffee, which was also still there in the morning. I added a small bottle of whisky, and it too was there – untouched – the next day.

"Ha!" I thought. "I'll catch these super-people at their own game. I'll provide something for them to steal that will tempt their perfect little souls!"

I went out and bought some artificial jewelry: a few strings of pearls for two francs and a rather genuine-looking pair of gold

earrings (two francs and forty centimes). I placed them carefully in a paper bag, with a small string of pearls hanging out, and put the whole collection on the rack of my bicycle.

I could hardly sleep that night. What scientist can rest in the midst of an important discovery? I had a strange, disquieting feeling. Would the jewelry be there in the morning? Did I really want the jewelry to be there or would I rather have it disappear. In other words, did I want to lose my faith in the Swiss people and demonstrate – once for all – that they were as human as anybody else, despite some theories to the contrary. I tossed and turned and eventually dozed off. I awoke when the dawn's early light entered my room. I dressed as quickly as I could and rushed down to the alley. My heart was pounding and I was out of breath. The bicycle . . . the bicycle, where was it? There . . . there . . . against the wall, where it always was in the morning. It was covered with a light dew – as it so often was. But there was nothing on the rack in the back. My jewelry was missing. Oh joy! My jewelry was missing. Or had it simply fallen off?

I looked underneath my bicycle. I looked all over that alley. It was gone! Filthy criminal, you have absconded with my genuine family jewels. How can one ever forgive thee?

I went upstairs and prepared my usual austere bohemian breakfast of eggs, bacon, cheese, steak, waffles, cake, coffee and ginger ale. As I was musing on this successful conclusion to months of planning and experimenting, the telephone rang.

"Hello," I said into the mouthpiece.

"This is the police department," came the answer. "My name is Dr. Lombardo P. Funderli of the Lost and Found Department, Valuable Stones Division, and we've just received a package containing jewelry which ostensibly belongs to you. Are you missing something or other?"

I told the man I would be right over. When I arrived at the police station, Dr. Funderli explained that one of the good citizens of Basel had seen a package on the back of a bicycle in an alleyway near where I lived. Upon closer examination, Mr. Basel Citizen discovered that some pearls were peeking out of the bag. Our anonymous friend quickly removed the entire package from the bicycle and brought it to the police station.

"That's very thoughtful," I remarked. "But tell me, how did you know the package belonged to me, and that I had forgotten it on the back rack of my bicycle?"

"Elementary, my dear sir," said the policeman. "We sent a squad of detectives down to the scene of the crime to investigate. They examined the bicycle, checked with the manufacturer, took down the serial numbers of all vital parts as well as the number of your bicycle license. The evidence clearly pointed to you as the owner of said vehicle."

"Are you going to imprison me for my laxity and sloppiness?" I asked.

"Of course not!" said Dr. Funderli. "But we are going to return your jewelry to you, which, as it turns out, is completely worthless trash. However, you will have to leave a voluntary contribution of, say, five francs for the Good Citizen who meant so well. In the future, please be kind enough to wear your jewelry rather than leaving it sitting around on old bicycles covered with dew. And, furthermore, don't ever again try to lose anything in Switzerland!"

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