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"Bien di bien onn" rather than champagne



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

The "Chalanda Marz" rings in the start of spring with deafening clangs.

BY CLAUDIA CADRUVI

AT MIDNIGHT on New Year's Eve I avoid kisses, champagne and the the ringing of bells. I need something else at New Year, and spend January 1st as often as I can in the Grisons Oberland. There, in the small snow-covered villages, the children go from house to house, entering without knocking. As soon as the householders appear the children greet them with the words "Bien di bien onn", which roughly translated means "Good day, good year". In some villages the children ask without further ado for a "biamau", a New Year's gift. In other villages the New Year's greeting is followed by a special prayer, and the master or mistress of the house is wished happiness in Heaven.

How big is the coin?

Rhaeto-Romansh is gradually being eroded, and unless you know exactly what the shivering hordes of children are about, you will understand nothing. But the children care not a fig about articulation, far less the Kingdom of Heaven. Because the most important part of the ritual is the "biamau" which follows their greeting. Critically and silently they follow every gesture of the

house-owner. The small pre-schooler beams when he is handed a large denomination of coin. In sheer joy he forgets to thank his benefactor and rushes outdoors. There the children congregate and tell each other what or how much they have been given, rejoicing or feeling offended if they think they have been given too little for their age. The smallest ones who are still too young to be entrusted with a purse are ecstatic.

The groups make their way throughout the village. They know from the previous year roughly what they can expect in each house. One door is pushed open with eager anticipation, while at another door they stop to debate who should enter first. One yard smells good, another sour. The old teacher Maissen welcomes the girls and boys warmly and takes the time to tell every child

how he or she resembles one or other of his or her parents. At Giuseppa's, the post-mistress, every child is dryly mocked, and woe betide the child who made fun of her last year. For strategic reasons many courageous children make the village rounds on their own. "There's more that way", they argue, though that is not always the case in the final count.

If I could join these children again, I would even refuse the banknote from old Giachen. All I would wish for is a cold nose filled with aromas of cooking from various kitchens, and the delicious sense of anticipation before opening every door. But I am too old for that, so instead I look forward to a Rhaeto-Romansh New Year and the sight of fidgeting, excited children exclaiming "Bien di bien onn".



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