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An Englishman Visits Switzerland

It was only after my first two or three visits to Switzerland that I began to realize the more subtle difference between that country and my own — England — so far as homosexuality was concerned. Before my first time in Zürich I had, of course, known of the legal position, with the more enlightened view taken in Swiss law, and certain things struck me very forcibly indeed within a matter of a few hours in the town.

Oddly enough, my first impression was a negative one. In Zürich — a notoriously 'gay' city — I had anticipated finding a considerable number of obvious types hanging around streets and bars but this did not prove to be the case and the first major contrast I found was between the painted 'rent' boys of, for example, Leicester Square in London, and the complete, or almost complete, absence of them in a town where they would have had not as much restriction on their activities as in England — *had there been any demand for those activities.*

But — and surely this is the greatest object lesson — the freedom which Switzerland enjoys has virtually eliminated the need for the paid boy who provides 'a safe place to go' (always the first consideration in England and other countries where an association between two consenting male adults is an offence in law).

This was, then, my first and deepest impression on arriving in Switzerland. Later, of course, I discovered that there were many factors common both to Switzerland and England, as indeed to all countries, certain bars and restaurants where homosexuals gathered; that these bars were graded as 'obvious' or more restrained; that 'camp' behaviour which would cause amusement in one place would be frowned on in another. These, of course, are degrees familiar enough in all countries and can equally be found in relation to so-called normal people as to homosexuals.

At first, therefore, I jumped somewhat hastily to the conclusion that legislation of homosexual behaviour in Switzerland had done little but remove or reduce to negligible proportions male prostitution on the streets and that otherwise things were much the same as in England.

Later I came to realize how very much more the difference in the legal position had meant to Switzerland and this arose, naturally enough, from my own experiences and my observations of the behaviour of other people.

There can be no doubt — and this realisation has come to me gradually but with increasing force — that there is now a completely different mental attitude to the whole question among the Swiss in general than is the case among the British and whilst I have not been visiting Switzerland long enough to know what the public approach was before legislation, I am prepared to wager that before that time it differed little from that obtaining in England today.

Since legislation, however, quite clearly the Swiss have come to see that this large body of men which differs from the accepted 'normal' is not necessarily vicious, is not depraved and degenerate, does not seduce young boys to a way of life fundamentally repugnant to them. On

the contrary — and this I have been told by normal Swiss men — they have realized that homosexuals are, in the vast majority of cases, good citizens, frequently leaders in industry, commerce and the arts, are trustworthy and loyal, and are most entertaining company for both sexes. —

This acceptance of something which before legislation could never have been demonstrated — the normality in every other respect of the so-called abnormal male — has made Switzerland a better and happier place. And not only for the homosexual.

What, then, does the observant Englishman see when he learns more about Switzerland? He sees that a man can greet his friend in a public place with signs of obvious affection — sometimes a kiss; sometimes to sit and merely hold hands in a bar, restaurant or cinema. Things which in England would, at the least, cause them to be asked to leave, in Switzerland cause no more than an indulgent smile and frequently lead, among both men and women, to a more friendly, uninhibited atmosphere.

It is possible, indeed probable, that these things are still offensive to some people and we, the minority, must never expect to be free to force ourselves to the notice of everyone indiscriminately. But it is in the very nature of the homosexual to go where other homosexuals gather and this has proved to be the case alike in Switzerland where legal tolerance is practised as in England where the homosexual is a social outcast.

This then, is what I have found in Switzerland — the two worlds living side by side as they do in England but with the vital difference that in Switzerland each side accepts the other as a normal part of life with functions and feelings older than history itself, whilst in my country bell, book, candle and policemen are used to exorcise a 'devil', an evil spirit which in fact dwells strongly in many of the very men — unhappy souls — who must through their office in law or religion try to suppress the unsuppressable.

J. S. B.

The charm of Erasmus

'With his poetry, his wit, and his grey eyes' says Froude 'he was as fascinating to one sex as to another'. Writing to his friend William Gauden (Gaudeno suo: Ep XV) he says: 'Never loved I man more than I have loved you by whom I supposed I was loved in return, O William my idol! Vulgar fires are all extinct. My heart is yours and only yours. You used to call me your Pylades or Theseus; I was rather your Orestes or Peirithous'.

Beuno.