

A travers la Suisse

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A TRAVERS LA SUISSE.

Some time ago I had a protracted argument with a prominent member of our Colony about propaganda matters in general.

He maintained, in connection with the Swiss Colony, that the *only* way in keeping the Swiss in touch with each other, and ultimately in close relationship with the home country, was, by giving them an opportunity to have frequent intercourse, be it by meetings, banquets, dances, smoking concerts, etc., etc.

This argument, I must admit, has some justification, and has proved its merits on innumerable occasions, although I do not agree that it is a solution *ad finem*.—I for one do not approve of the present policy of various Swiss Societies to cancel and cut short *all* social activities on account of the present financial situation. It seems to me that we are going from one extreme to another. Through these columns, we have certainly advocated in the past a retrenchment, as we considered that *f.i.* the social activities during the last season, were excessive and in no way justified.

In an article "Towards Co-operation," we urged the various Societies to combine their Entertainments for this Season, thus saving, to both members and institutions, unnecessary expenses. Unfortunately our endeavours in this direction met without a tangible response, although they touched a very vital spot in the life of our Colony.

This knotty problem, which so often occupied the minds of those who are taking an active part in the doings of the colony, has been solved in a very ingenious way by the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, (London Group) by their film show of October the 10th. Here is a Society, which has, as far as I am aware, departed from the usual custom of inviting their members and friends to dinners, dances and other festivities, and yet in spite of these omissions, succeeded time after time to fill the spacious King George's Hall to its utmost capacity, for two consecutive performances. This should provide food for thought.

This first show of the season was again a memorable performance, we hardly need to mention that those wonderful and most interesting views of the Alps of the canton of Valais from the Lake of Geneva were universally admired. Of much interest was a picture depicting a rescue on the St. Bernard Pass by the world famous monks and dogs of the Monastery.

During the first part of the performance, Mr. A. F. Suter, the popular President of the Society, gave an extremely interesting address on "The Character of the Swiss," and owing to its historical value, we have much pleasure in publishing same "in extenso." He said:

"In Switzerland, above all other lands of Europe, is the greatness of Nature manifest. But not even the Alps can overshadow the story of her gallant people. The Swiss are more interesting even than Switzerland."

"To a very remarkable extent the history of Switzerland has affected the general current of European history, partly through the courage of the mercenary soldiers that the alpine communities sent abroad in olden times, partly because always Switzerland has provided a house of refuge for political exiles from other countries."

These are the words of Sir Frank Fox, in the preface to his book on Switzerland, first published in 1915. This preface appeals to me as a very proper introduction to anything that we may see or hear of the character of Switzerland and the Swiss.

If we try to arrive at an estimation of the character of a person or a nation, two considerations are of prime importance and these are the racial origin and the natural surroundings. Throughout the life of such a person or nation these two essential conditions constantly determine, directly or indirectly, the thoughts and deeds, the ambitions or indifference, the progress or set back, the worldly and spiritual position, of the person or nation.

We therefore have to look at the origin of the Swiss in the first instance, and this is indeed interesting. From the earliest historical records we know that the country which is Switzerland to-day was inhabited by Celtic tribes. The Helvetians were settled in the lake district north of the Alps, and another Celtic tribe in the Valais and Western Switzerland. The Rhetians occupied the inaccessible mountain regions of the Grisons, Appenzell, Glarus, part of St. Gall and the Tyrol. They were a fusion of Celtic and Etruscan tribes. The Tessin was inhabited by the so-called Leponti, of Italian origin.

The invasion of the Romans and the incorporation of the country into the Roman Empire took place between the years of 58 to 15 B.C. Roman armies crossed the Alps by the Great St. Bernard, the Julier and the Splügen passes, and broke in from the West across the Jura, defeated the Celtic tribes individually and subjugated the country into a Roman province. The invader imposed his culture and language

upon the surviving population, and it is interesting to note that this change of culture is still most clearly noticeable in the Grisons and in Western Switzerland, after all these centuries. This period is marked by great progress in the increase and welfare of the population; considerable market towns and military settlements sprang up; industry and trade flourished in the safety of Roman co-ordination and direction.

In the fifth century Rome, now rapidly decaying, had split into the two empires, the Eastern with Constantinople as governmental seat and the Western, still under Rome, and she was losing her far flung provinces one by one through insurrections and other causes. A general and deep seated unrest had fallen upon the peoples of Europe, resulting in the enormous chaos of the European Transmigration. The far reaching effect of this singular historical event affected Switzerland most profoundly.

In 455 two independent invasions of Switzerland took place, both by tribes of Germanic origin, the consequences of which changed the whole aspect of the country.

The invasion from the North, across the Rhine, was effected by the Allemans, a fierce tribe of semi-nomadic warriors, who exterminated the celto-roman population and settled in the plains between the Alps and the Rhine. From now onwards, this region became typically German in speech and customs.

The invasion from the West took quite a different turn. Here the invaders were the Burgundians, who were also of Germanic origin, but had before this time settled in Savoy. They broke into the plains of Western Switzerland, but, being of a more peaceful and civilizable character than their cousins the Allemans, they were unable to impose their will upon the more powerful Roman culture. They were accordingly absorbed into the population and gradually romanized.

The Rhetian Alps, always most difficult of access, withstood the invaders and retained their celto-roman culture and language. The Leponti in the Tessin also remained undisturbed by the transmigration of the fifth century.

It will now become apparent to us that the distribution of languages in Switzerland has undergone no further radical change since the fifth century, the only difference being a slight extension of the allemannic tongue both East and West in the space of nearly 1,500 years.

If we now consider the *surroundings* in which the Swiss has grown up, we shall go a step further in the appreciation of his qualities and limitations. It is a common error to suppose that all Swiss are mountaineers, just because the two terms, Switzerland and the Alps, are inseparable. It is easy for the tourist to forget that Switzerland of to-day is an industrial country. In truth, as we have seen, it is only the Rhetians who have never been defeated by the lowlander and who can therefore claim unbroken mountaineer stock.

And yet, it is certain, that the most profound and the most typical influence upon the character of the Swiss has been exerted by the mountains. But not in the sense that their inspiration will make him a hero, imbuing him with the noble sacrifice of life rather than of liberty, and inducing him to become the liberator of the oppressed and the weak.

I have the impression that the influence of the mountains works the other way. They inspire the mountain dweller with fear and horror. He has been taught by bitter experience that the malignant and untameable forces of Nature will destroy him without warning:—on a fine spring morning an avalanche will bury him, his house and family and beasts without a moment's notice a mountain slide will turn his life's work to ruin, even if he escape; the sudden deviation of a swollen stream will wash away his patch of cultivated soil, or a serious break in the bisse will destroy his crop without mercy and he is driven from his paternal hut. Or he may lose his foothold when hay-making on the steep slopes and be dashed to pieces at the bottom of the abyss. Against all these calamities he is utterly helpless, so that danger is always in his mind and his every action is subconsciously defensive. Yet he loves his mountains with a fierce and unalterable love.

You see now why it is not the mountain dweller who invented mountaineering for a pastime and why it was left to the foreign tourist to do so. He, the mountain dweller, had no time for it. His allotted task was and is to toil with all his might during the short summer to produce enough food and fuel to keep his family and cattle from starvation and freezing to death during the long winter months.

It is not unnatural that this constant struggle with Nature to keep alive has endowed him with wonderful qualities. The mountains leave him the choice of two things:—to quit or to overcome the natural obstacles of his surroundings. Whichever he did, he took with him those valuable qualities:—Industry, Tenacity

and Thrift. If he stayed, the mountains forced him to become an engineer; if he quitted, he readily adapted himself to whatever work was offering and urgent, always tenacious enough to better himself.

Now I am not going to assert that in all of us Swiss these urges are equally noticeable because we have not all come direct from the mountain side. Nor would it be possible to speak of a homogeneous Swiss character at all, when you consider the four widely divergent racial influences of culture, were it not for the astounding cohesion of these four elements for the last 800 years, during which period the necessity for self-defence engendered a spirit of communal responsibility of a degree not easily found elsewhere. The innate spirit of patriotism in us Swiss, the direct legacy of centuries of intense striving and endeavour, is as brightly burning to-day as ever it was; 1914 surely was a proof. Where in the world is the Swiss who can suppress entirely the consciousness of his nationality, although he become a 99% American?

But do not imagine that there are no limitations, no black spots, in the make-up of the Swiss character. There are many and they are varied. Tenacity, steadfastness, easily becomes stubbornness; sweet reasonableness is often absent and the very industry of the Swiss may lead to miserliness and greed. The "Kantönlicheist" which seems to us such a laughable matter is really an absence of what the English call "team-spirit" and shows up a deplorable deficiency in the Swiss character. It has been responsible for many serious misunderstandings, but the greatest disaster it ever caused was the defection of 8,000 troops from the Swiss army at Marignano on the score of some slight disagreement about leadership. Is it not permissible to imagine that, but for this invincible stubbornness, Swiss history might have run a very different course? What, if the 8,000 malcontents had remained on the battlefield to turn the tide in favour of the federal troops?

Foreign critics have not always been kind to us in their estimation of our character, especially the French. "Petit pays, petits esprits."—Simple gens,—l'honnête Suisse—are French expressions not unknown to us. "The Swiss, a French writer states, are incapable of showing anything but their invincible mediocrity in all things."

The English who know us better by reason of closer contact, at least in modern times, are more considerate in their criticism. You still have in mind Sir Frank Fox's preface. Other appreciations in a similar tone are often to be heard or read, but what puzzles the English observer particularly is the element of paradox in the Swiss character.

"The Switzer of the twentieth century is intensely patriotic, but he is a willing exile wherever there is money to be made.—Often he shows himself greedy and rapacious, yet he is markedly hospitable and charitable.—He is eager for liberty, but surrounds his life with a host of petty tyrannies of regulation.—Two characteristics the Swiss have clear-cut:—Thrift and Industry. I have never heard of a prodigal Swiss"—says Sir Frank Fox.

And at that we will leave it. We Swiss abroad, whatever our profession, we are still patriotic, we are still democratic; with all our faults and limitations, we are still invincibly Swiss."

Hearty applause greeted the speaker on terminating his very able exposé. M. C. R. Paravicini, the Swiss Minister, then shortly addressed the audience, voicing his appreciation for the worthy efforts, in fostering and strengthening the ties of attachment to our native land. A short reference to the late Councillor of Legation, M. Theuring de Sonnenberg, deeply impressed the gathering.—

The pictures depicting Winter Sports created much hilarity and peels of laughter greeted some of the extraordinary performances. Much admired were the various scenes of the different popular festivals in Switzerland, such as the Narcissus Fête at Montreux, the Fête des roses at Geneva and the Landsgemeinde in the Canton of Appenzell. The latter film was graciously lent by the Manager of the Swiss Federal Railways in London. A special treat was in store for the little ones, Felix the cat made his appearance, and with his frolics amused young and old alike.

Much too soon this splendid performance came to an end, but nobody grudged making room for the "second house," which was again packed. No small part of the success of the afternoon is due to the musical programme, which was in the experienced hands of Mr. Newman, whose stock of Swiss gramophone records seems to be well nigh unexhausting.

The Nouvelle Société Helvétique again have given us immeasurable pleasure and they deserve the thanks of all those who have been privileged to attend their performance, they have managed to knit the ties which attach us to our country still closer and to keep awake in us the love for our beautiful little homeland.

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