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AN ENCOUNTER ON THE FLUELA.

By MICHAEL ROBERTSON.

(Taken from the "Blackwoods Magazine" with due acknowledgment.)

It was a Sunday morning in July, and I had almost completed my thirteen-kilometre climb from Süs in the Engadine to the top of the Fluela Pass, when I saw another cyclist ahead of me. His bicycle was propped against a boulder by the roadside and he was busy beside it, taking photographs with a miniature camera. I paid no particular attention to him and concentrated upon the arduous task of pushing my bicycle up the steep mountain road. I was in fair training; for I had already overcome the Brenner, the Thurn, the Ofen, and the Gross-Glockner; but although the Fluela is a small affair in comparison with the Gross-Glockner, the last few kilometres of any pass are painful. It may well occur to the reader that a pursuit such as this could surely only provide entertainment for a distorted mind. I must therefore rationalise my mania and explain why I enjoy pushing bicycles over Alpine passes.

Their names alone have always had a disturbing effect upon me. Fluela, Albula, Julier, Bernina, Septimer, Strela, are splendid-sounding words which conjure up visions of great grandeur and beauty, and, as far as I am concerned, set in motion sensations such as most people associate with martial music and royal processions. Luckmanier, Stelvio, Gotthard, Bernardino. How often have I come across them when poring over a map of Switzerland, as I frequently do when exiled in England, and felt a sudden quickening of the pulse!

It was my intention, when I set out for Central Europe, to ride over these obstacles whose names had such an attraction for me, and, with this end in view, I had purchased a special light-weight tourer equipped with three speeds. I had had little contact with a bicycle since my school-days, and it was not until I met three fanatical cyclists in Carinthia one evening that I realised how complex these machines can be. I was standing by the roadside in the hot Drava Valley, pondering upon alternative routes into South Tyrol, when these three fanatics streaked into sight. As they passed me they called out a friendly greeting, as is the way with the cycling fraternity, and, realising that they were fellow countrymen, I waved my map

at them to stop. This they obligingly did, returning to give me advice about the roads. They had just come over the Gross-Glockner and were speeding hot-foot for the Dolomites, where a succession of steep passes awaited them. I mentioned modestly that I, too, had come over the Gross-Glockner; whereupon they exclaimed that this was impossible, because I only had three gears. I was rather nettled by this denial of my achievement, and retorted that of course I had not ridden the machine the whole way, and how many gears did they expect me to have.

It was then that they gave the astounding information that they had no less than twenty gears apiece on their respective machines. Later the same evening I met them again in the village of Sillian, close to the Italian frontier, where I spent the night. I found them after dinner in a neighbouring inn, and I was initiated, with the aid of diagrams and beer, into the mysteries of tension sprockets and transmission cables. Each of them had designed his bicycle according to his own theory of how to motivate a machine with the minimum effort. Week-end trials throughout the year in England culminated in this annual orgy in the Alps. Never, under any circumstances, did any of them push a bicycle. Such a procedure would have involved immense loss of face.

And now, as I ascended the last lap of the Fluela, I wish that I had the assistance of the seventeen-odd gears which my machine lacked. However, when I came alongside the photographer, who had attracted my notice, I perceived that he was in worse straits than myself; for not only did his machine have no supplementary gears at all, but it was a lady's bicycle, and very upright.

He was packing his camera kit methodically into his wind-jacket, which he then folded neatly and strapped on to the carrier of his bicycle. He hailed me in an incomprehensible dialect which I assumed to be one of the German-Swiss variety, yet somehow he did not seem to have the appearance of a Swiss, a modest race, who are seldom seen wearing only singlets and very brief, black shorts. He had yellow hair, blue eyes, and a sunburnt face whose features were well-formed and regular save for a certain thickness of lip and width of nostril that suggested animality rather than sensuality. He was perhaps twenty-five years of age.

From the torrent of ugly sound that assailed my ears I extracted one familiar word.

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"Engländer?"

I nodded.

He then pointed to himself and used another word with which I had, for a number of years, been all too familiar.

"Kriegsgefangener in England!" he declared.

"Kriegsgefangener in Deutschland!" I replied.

After this exchange of mystic abracadabras we were as intimate as members of a secret sect. I should have realised at once that my friend came from the Fatherland. The animal appearance, the scanty clothes, the meticulous manner in which he packed his kit — all were indicative. I was, however, under the impression that Germans were unable to travel abroad at this time and certainly I had not expected to meet one. We pushed on up the road together, in the sympathetic spirit that arose from our mutual experiences as prisoners of war, and he explained that he was staying with some friends at Chur, who were paying the expenses of his holiday and had lent him the bicycle. Each week-end he set forth upon what he described as "an excursion into the Nature," in order that he might capture with his camera the beautiful flowers and the mountain scenery as a permanent record of his holiday. He was a wood-carver by profession, and his native town was Stuttgart, which accounted for the strong Swabian accent that I was now just beginning to understand.

Our climb brought us at last to the Fluela Hospice, where we parted company. The Swabian announced



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his intention of taking more photographs, and I, who wanted to reach Davos for lunch, mounted my bicycle, waved good-bye, and coasted off down the mountain road. No further effort was required of me, and for the next thirteen kilometres I was able to enjoy that intimate communion with the country-side which is denied to the motorist but which rewards the exertions of the cyclist and the hiker. The heat of the mid-day sun was moderated to a pleasant warmth by the cool air that embraced me as soon as I began to descend. I caught a drift of the mingled scents from the mountain meadows now filled with alpine roses, gentians, wild violets, and a host of other summer flowers. I heard the warning whistles of marmots and occasionally had a glimpse of their fat, brown bodies as they bounded back into their burrows. Tree-pipits, which seemed to be the commonest bird at this height, were singing all around me. Davos lay below in the sun-filled valley which, for a transient visitor like myself, was pure delight, but which, for the many who are confined there, must be no less than a prison-house whose scenery is no solace but a constant and bitter reminder of the life of action their sickness denies to them.

When I rocketed down the last stretch of the hill and entered Davos-Dorf a grinning mechanic shouted out to me from the garage by the railway station —

"The 'Tour de Suisse' passed through here yesterday."

"I know," I replied, "I am the last man in the 'Tour de Suisse'!"

It was by now an old joke and it never failed me, I had made it in Italy and I was to repeat it in France. During my travels on the Continent last summer I was dogged and haunted by those three fierce and enthralling bicycle races — the 'Tour d'Italie,' the 'Tour de Suisse,' and the 'Tour de France.' They were in progress in each of the three countries when I visited them, and, although I never saw one, they were never far distant, and there was rumour of them wherever I went. Either the 'Tour' had passed through a town the day before I arrived, as at Davos, or it was expected a few hours after my departure. Always I was associated with them and an object of comment and mirth.

I should have liked to witness the 'Tour de France' on its hysterical career through that country. An affair which evoked such a tide of passion was, I felt sure, bound sooner or later to end in tears. Such indeed proved to be so in the summer of 1950, when glass and nails were spread on the road near Marseilles before the approaching Italian team, and when somebody struck Bartali, the Italian leader and European champion, when he fell off his machine. The Italian team was promptly withdrawn and a crescendo of Latin hysteria was unleashed, such as had not been heard since Mussolini called for Tunis, Corsica, and Nice. The sponsors of the race at once changed the route which, in previous years, had been from Menton into Italy, returning to France at another point in the Alpes-Maritimes. After this incident it was prudently decided that the lap Nice-Menton should be 'aller et retour.'

I went into the station buffet at Davos and ordered a ham-sandwich and some coffee. I had not been seated long when the door opened and my German friend entered. He hesitated for a moment, uncertain

whether to join me. I waved to him to come over, indicating that as far as I was concerned the state of war between our two countries was ended.

"How did you like being a prisoner of the English?" I asked him. But he would not commit himself and was content with the comment —

"The life of a prisoner of war is no kind of life for a man."

"Did you know that Davos was a hotbed of Nazis during the war?" I went on to say, rather provokingly. I am afraid.

"Some people seem to think that all the Germans were Nazis," he replied bitterly.

"But many of these Nazis were Swiss; some of them were doctors and municipal officials," I said.

"Ah, but you must understand, Switzerland was once a part of Germany. We are all one folk really."

I was thankful that we were alone in the buffet and that no Swiss overheard this awful assurance, and I hastily steered the conversation to more cordial questions.

We agreed to ride on to Chur together, and, having paid our separate bills, returned to the road. It was with reluctance that we withheld ourselves from joining the bathers in the Davoser See, whose blue waters sparkled alluringly beside the road as we left the town. A short climb brought us to Wolfgang, and from there the road was one long, glorious descent through the famous villages of Klosters and KUBLIS to Landquart in the Rhine valley below. Our conversation was intermittent and inconsequential, for we were continually sailing past one another. I would hear a snatch of Swabian dialect as my companion drew level with me, but before I could reply he was ahead, crouching low over the handle-bars of his staid machine, which was not built for speed. We were breathless when we reached the level valley at the end of this reckless ride, and our chests, which had had their fill of the intoxicating mountain air, were sore and heaving.

A hot wind was sweeping up the broad, high-walled valley of the Upper Rhine; for, with Lake Constance at its base, the valley forms a funnel through which the warm air is drawn until it is finally dissipated in the branch valleys leading to the narrow gorges and glaciers of the Grisons. It blows steadily during the summer months, an unrelenting wind which gathers up the long tresses of the willows on the river-banks and sets them floating and waving all day long, and which keeps the leaves of the roadside poplars rustling in an endless, restless, excited dance. It

brought no relief to our overheated bodies, nor, although it was behind us, did it help us on our way. The road from Landquart to Chur, which I had seen many times from the train, had always appeared to me to be level. I soon discovered that it had many undulations. At the end of a long day's bicycle ride each small incline demands ever increasing effort. I was not sorry when we reached the outskirts of Chur in the late afternoon. My friend, who was staying in this quarter, was about to say "Good-bye," when I suggested that he join me in a glass of beer before I took the mountain train to Arosa, my destination for that evening. He immediately agreed, and we found a café by the station where we could sit out in the shade of trelliswork over which vines had spread their tentacles. Several solid Swiss burghers were seated there, taking their Sunday afternoon's ease, and I do not think they altogether approved of our appearance, our mood, or our conversation, which was concerned with an experience they had not shared. One was aware of their moral superiority. Their hands were clean. They had played no part in digging the grave of Western Europe.

After exertions such as we had taken, beer was the only possible drink, and I think we were scarcely conscious of the first two litres that passed down our parched throats; for they just about replaced the liquid that had left us during the course of the day. A third was appeasing our thirst when a glance at the station clock revealed that my train was due to depart instantly. It was drawn up, like a tram, before the main station, and my friend seized my bicycle and we rushed across to it. A porter took the bicycle and I flung myself into a carriage, forgetting that the Swiss, who leave nothing to chance, always keep their station clocks five minutes in advance.

I leaned out of the window and conversed excitedly with my friend, who was buoyant from beer and in a mood to swear blood brotherhood. When the whistle blew and the train started to move I felt that I knew him well enough to venture a joke.

"I do not believe that you were really taking photographs of flowers," I laughingly declared. "I am sure that, like a good German, you were taking photographs of the Swiss defences."

The friendly smile fled from his features, which became suddenly stubborn and brutish. I did not hear his reply. It may have only been a foolish fancy, but it seemed to me that his lips formed the word — "Natürlich!"

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