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ROUNDABOUT SWITZERLAND by Derek Meakin

For most of the way on our flight from Manchester to Zurich we see little of the ground below, travelling high above a thick bank of cloud that cuts out completely the winter scene.

Our magic carpet transports us to another world — a world of peace and light which would make any hardened businessman on his way to the Swiss Industries Fair want to break out into poetry.

We seem to be soaring through a carefree land of eternal summers, illuminated by a brilliant golden globe of a sun beaming out of a transparent blue sky.

Just as the Vosges mountains loom out of the distance we leave the curtain of cloud. Soon the horizon is dotted with rows of jagged peaks, flecked here and there with wisps of snow.

But still there is an air of unreality about it all — the thick forests, a deep olive green neatly bisected by endless ribbons of roads, the hazy spirals of smoke rising from the little hamlets, cars looking like restless ants scurrying along the highways, the terraced fields clinging to the slopes as though a contour map had suddenly come to life.

The plane goes higher, and as the land climbs with us we see the countryside is brushed with its first light covering of snow, across which lie the dark streaking shadows of the lonely trees. Higher still, and a wild lifeless country meets our eyes. Heads glued to windows see the border where man has given up struggling against the hills, the barren land standing out in stark contrast to the industry of the lowlands.

Then over to the foothills again, a broad miserable-looking valley, and back to the monotonous plain, with

spiders-web roads converging on Colmar, an unhappy jumble of factories and homes wreathed in a man-made mist that belches from the chimneys of the textile mills.

But this cheerless scene swiftly slides away beneath us and the Swissair plane's nose points to a much nobler sight. Far, far away can be seen sharp-pointed peaks, more clearly defined this time, that rise proudly into the turquoise-tinted sky as though asserting their independence. It is like the first sight of the promised land.

We sweep over a broad and sluggish river and once more are flying over the land of the hills. First there is a line of lesser slopes fur-coated with thousands of stately pines, standing like a guard before the mighty summits that still beckon from the distance.

Then we see real snow at last. It clings to the bare clearings on the slopes like patches of ermine alongside the fur.

This, at last, is Switzerland — a picture-postcard land, wild but not unfriendly, with real Christmas trees dotting the snow.

We are fast approaching Zurich's Kloten airport, and as we lose height the land rises to greet us, throwing open its arms with the exuberance of a long-lost friend. Suddenly thick fog envelopes the throbbing plane as we bank and sink lower and lower. Swirling mists rush past the windows. There is a tense moment, but the fog fades as quickly as it arrived and out of the haze below us appears the ground and the broad runway. After a slight bump as we touch down there is a smooth run-in and the plane is home.

Next — The Clockwork City on the Limmat.

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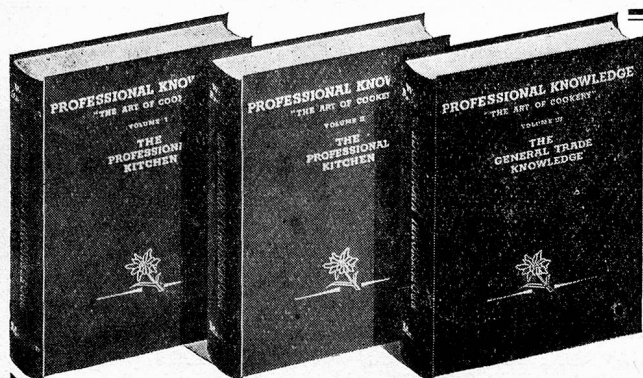
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