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As we tumble out of the plane from Manchester Switzerland puts on its best sunny smile in welcome. A glance at the airport clock causes us to marvel at Swissair's precision that has brought us here almost dead on time. For despite the delay at Ringway (remember the British immigration officer who upset the routine by turning up half an hour late?) and the uncertainty of the weather, we touched down only four minutes behind schedule.

The customs examination takes three minutes, and in a twinkling we are in the airport coach on the last leg of our journey to Zurich.

As always Zurich greets us with a business-like air that befits a great commercial capital. Here is that orderly efficiency so typical of German-speaking Switzerland. Here is that uncanny cleanliness — the litter-free roads, the solid buildings that have never known what grime means.

Since the time of the Roman Empire Zurich has been the crossroads of Europe. To-day you can stand in the Bahnhof and watch the whole world go by. There are smartly-dressed housewives from the suburbs out for an hour's shopping, skiers who look as though they have stepped straight from the multi-coloured travel posters, men with Russian-style fur caps pulled well over their ears (a most practical if out-of-place headgear in nippy weather). Clustered together at the station entrance are a handful of women newspaper sellers, their fat round faces framed by woolly headscarves which in turn are topped by peaked caps.

But what surely cannot fail to catch the eyes of the visitors are the shop windows. In Switzerland

window-dressers are true artists, but then they have the good fortune to possess the kind of materials to be artistic about. Some of the things shops in Britain are forced to sell for want of anything better are enough to dampen anyone's enthusiasm for an exciting window display.

The Zurich shop windows seem to be really out of this world. They command your full attention to such a degree that I can well understand why the street accident rate in the city is so high.

I have to admit, however, that Zurich makes me feel a little uncomfortable. Everyone puts on an air of having a job to do and intends doing it in the most serious way possible. Everything seems to run like clockwork. Zurich is far too efficient for me.

Take the lunch-time crowds, for instance. On the stroke of 12 everyone stops work and the streets are jammed with people intent on getting somewhere fast. Two hours later the streets seem almost deserted.

You can't help but have the impression that for the rest of the day the people of Zurich are pouring over their account books, rushing off telegrams, or having long-distance telephone calls with their agents and customers in all parts of the world. And this is not all imagination when you realise that more than half the country's financial transactions take place in Zurich, that the city handles a quarter of Switzerland's telegrams and also makes a quarter of the total phone calls.

The people whose job it is to publicise Zurich once boasted to me that it is the most characteristic Swiss town there is. How wrong they are! Zurich is a city that stands on its own. To make such a claim for Zurich is as bad as saying that Geneva is a 100 per cent Swiss town too.

Yet Zurich has not always been a straight-faced and strait-laced city. Once, way back in the shades of time, it was a place of gaiety and laughter . . . the town that centuries ago gave birth to Knight Rüdiger von Manesse, the romantic young man with a song in his heart who went round collecting medieval German love-lyrics and thereby found himself an honoured niche in history.

Would the modern von Manesse be happy in present-day Zurich? I doubt it. My guess is he would do like so many German-Swiss and make his home in Lausanne, whose carefree atmosphere would be much more to his liking.

Next — On to Davos.

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