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SWISS LANDMARKS IN LONDON

It has been said that the streets of London are paved with gold, and looking at them when the reflection of the street lights plays on their surface, one is indeed tempted to think so. For the polish of a London street is a thing apart, unique, unforgettable. But there is reason to believe that the Office of Works achieves that effect with nothing more expensive or valuable than Val-de-Travers asphalt, which is dug out of the earth somewhere in the Canton of Neuchâtel.

I mention this because it has occurred to me that a Swiss will find at every step he takes in London something to remind him of his native country. The truth of the matter was borne in on me as I quaffed a whiskey-and-soda with a Baslese friend I had met on Swiss soil — so to speak — as I wandered down that famous strip of Val-de-Travers asphalt called The Strand. In England a whiskey-and-soda is just called “a whiskey and Schwepps” because, although there are several good brands of whiskey, there is only one brand of soda-water — “Schwepps”. Well, the original Mr. Jakob Schwepps, who came to England a century or so ago, was as Swiss as chocolate or canned milk. He came, indeed, from Geneva. If one excepts the few drops of whiskey that go to the making of it nowadays, the Scottish national drink may therefore reasonably be said to have a Swiss origin.

Pondering on this matter, I took my Baslese friend to the Wallace Collection — a thing which is considered to be so utterly English that it is looked upon in London as the finest collection of its kind in the world, and yet, after all, it really contains remarkably little that is English. It is all French, Italian, Spanish — anything but English. Nor could one by any stretch of imagination call it Swiss, I pondered, although facing me on the wall hung a fine specimen of Léo Paul Robert. Léo Paul Robert; In Neuchâtel you will invariably be told that it is Léopold Robert — that is as long as you, the stranger, call him Léo Paul. But if you, by chance, have been to Neuchâtel before, and call him Léopold — why, then the good Neuchâtelois will smile at you with commiseration and ask if you mean Léo Paul . . . They are like that, the Neuchâtelois.

But Robert is by no means the only exponent of Swiss art to be found at Hereford House. In the glass cases which house “the finest specimens of ancient weapons and armour in the world” is a little weapon which I have heard described by the casual loungers who make little round smudges with their noses on the glass cases of every free museum in London, as a dirk, a poignard, a stiletto and — inevitably — as a knife. I, who have looked up its number in the catalogue, know well that it is a dagger, “an Indian dagger in gold and enamelled in London in the third quarter of the eighteenth century”, that its hilt is one of the most beautiful things of its kind, and that it was wrought by one George Michael Moser, of Switzerland. He was once drawing master to King George III and became the first Keeper of the Royal Academy. The catalogue will tell you also that “the exposed gold parts are of very high workmanship, and show an exceptional refinement in the goldsmiths’ art”.

Here indeed is one of the most beautiful things in the most exclusive collection in the world, a thing to dream over, to write poetry about (if one is gifted that way), or just to fondle lovingly in one’s imagination, with one’s nose against the glass that holds it. Michael Moser! I have wandered in the streets of Berne, of Basle, of Interlaken,

I have jodeled in the Oberland and eaten *fondue* — well, everywhere, I have sat on wooden benches in the seats of learning of Basle, of Zurich, in Neuchâtel. I have been intimate, at home, in twenty-two cantons, and I have discussed politics, and “Pilsner”, and other weighty matters in every nook and cranny of the *Eidgenossenschaft*; but never, never has the name of Michael Moser been framed by a Swiss mouth within my hearing. To my Baslese friend I said, as we quaffed our whiskey in the Strand, “Now you are in London you will no doubt pay a visit to Michael Moser” . . . ? “Don’t know him”, my friend answered callously, “no friend of mine . . . Let’s have another drink”.

In England the name of Michael Moser is possibly not a household word — but it is better known than it is in Switzerland. Like Madame Tussaud, Moser has no honour in his own country. There are, I believe, many Swiss who have never heard the name of Madame Tussaud. To them I will say that Marie Grossholz, born in 1760 in the town of Berne, attained a fame which has never since been rivalled by any one of her compatriots. I may also add with equal truth that there are many people the world over, yea, even children in their teens, who know as much about Madame Tussaud as there is to know, to whom the name is a symbol of romance, the embodiment of a cherished desire, and to whom one might ask in vain the question; “Where and what is Switzerland?” Madame Tussaud’s wax-works were burnt to the ground a few years ago, and from the four corners of the earth came echos of the sorrow that was England’s.

Then there is the sad case of Peter Mark Roget. Who in Switzerland has ever heard of that eminent physician Dr. Roget? He also was no prophet in his own country. In England, it is true, he was no prophet either, but he nevertheless did a remarkable thing. He compiled a dictionary that works backwards. Nothing of the kind had ever been attempted previously, nor has, to my knowledge, anything like it been accomplished since. In the ordinary dictionary one looks up a word to find its meaning. In Roget’s Thesaurus one looks up the meaning, and, lo! there is the word for it.

A silly idea, you say. Then you have never tried to solve a cross-word puzzle! For nearly a century Roget’s book was known only to the *litterati*, to the belletricians. Today it is the most ubiquitous thing in the British Isles. It is on sale at every bookstall, in use in every library. To save the life of their copy, the authorities of the British Museum have had to turn the cross-word puzzlers from their doors.

Roget, incidentally, was one of the prime movers in the foundation of the University of London. Let his name not be forgotten.

There are many things in the British Museum besides Roget’s “Thesaurus” to remind one of Switzerland. If one is not a “crosspuzzler”, one may still enter there, and I would advise the Swiss who does so to seek out before all things one of the most curious and interesting books in the world: The Passavant Bible. It once graced the book-shelf of the good king Charlemagne, and it is said that Alcuin who wrought it sent it to Rome in the year 800, so that Charlemagne might handle it when he donned the imperial crown in Rome in that year. By devious ways it came in time to the Abbey of Grandes Villis, near Basle, where it lay until the occupation by the French in 1715, when it was confiscated, along with other treasures, and sold. Some time later it was sold again to Mr. Speyer-Passavant, of Basle.

Mr. Speyer-Passavant was apparently no lover of books, but he had nevertheless a keen appreciation of their value. It is recorded that he went to Paris and offered his Bible to the French Government for Frs.60,000.— (Swiss). But the French Government would have none of it; nor would they buy it for Frs.40,000.— So Mr. Passavant took it to England and offered it to the Duke of Suffolk, who was the greatest booklover of his time. But he loved not the Charlemagne Bible. It was then offered to the British Museum, on successive occasions, for £12,000, for £8,000, and for £6,500. The British Museum would not have it at any of those prices. It would have been a nice ending to the story if Mr. Passavant had taken his Bible back with him to Basle, seeing how much more highly he valued it than did other people. Also, had he lived long enough, he might have brought off a deal with it today for a higher sum than he ever dreamt of then. But he did otherwise. He took it to Evans, the auctioneer, who put it up for sale . . . This is a horrible story, and I would fain end it here, but for the sake of historical accuracy I must add that Mr. Passavant bought it himself at the auction of £1,500 sooner than let it go at that price. Here indeed he might well have gone back to Basle with his book. Instead, he sold it eventually to the British Museum for £750. Poor Mr. Passavant . . .

M. C. O'CONNOR.

Addition

Mr. O'Connor in his very interesting article omits mention of Charles l'Abelie of Vevey, another Swiss whose work in London is famous, but whose name is forgotten.

Dean Bridel says of him: "Everybody has heard of the beautiful Westminster Bridge, 1,220 feet in length, whose central arch has an opening of 72 feet, and which took twelve years to build and cost £218,000 pounds sterling); but it is generally unknown that the architect of this fine construction was a Swiss; his name was Charles l'Abelie, born at Vevey, and it is time to render him the glory that is his due.

"As no English architect dared to undertake this work, he volunteered to do so and succeeded against all obstacles.

"He also made, under the very eyes of the Prince of Wales, the plans for the Palace of St. James. Whether he was not well paid", continues the genial chronicler, "or whether he was a poor economist, his talents did not lead him to fortune: he retired to Paris, where he died an octogenarian, poor and unknown, on the 17th December 1781".

The same authority tells us that George III, when Prince of Wales, with two other illustrious volunteer soldiers in the campaign against the Turks, Prince Eugene and the Prince of Bavaria (later Emperor Charles VII), were surrounded by a large body of Tartars, when a young Swiss officer from Berne, Jean-Rodolphe Dachselhofer, *aide-de-camp* to Maréchal Comte Palfi of Austria, saw their peril from the summit of a hill and instantly gathering a troop of cavalry, dashed to their rescue, falling upon the Tartars and putting them to flight. Prince Eugene embraced him as their liberator and promised him advancement; the Prince of Wales made him his first *aide-de-camp* at the Battle of Belgrade; and when he became King of England, invited him in 1743 to his headquarters at Worms, admitted him to his table and covered him with distinctions.

So that we may say that without this prompt intervention of a Swiss, King George III might never have come to the throne.

(Reprinted from "Swiss Observer" 5th October 1935.)

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