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Dusk at the Bettmeralp

It is cosy and warm indoors. The double windows fit so tightly that not the slightest draft will creep in. The whole building is centrally heated by electricity, most efficiently and always piping hot water—not bad at 6,000ft.!

It has begun to snow softly and silently, and it never stops all afternoon, billions of fine dry grains. I go out, my hooded anorak protecting me. Dusk sets in early. I make some enquiries at the local ski school office: Swiss ski school instruction is such a boom, especially for children and beginners.

The road is almost deserted now; there are a few inveterate ski enthusiasts about; one or two instructors whiz by, recognisable by their pillbox red anoraks and superb tan. A mother is pushing home her snow-covered pram mounted on skis. On the main practice slope a father teaches his two little sons to do some modest ski jumping. A mongrel dog rolls himself luxuriously in the snow, and a couple of children slide down on a toboggan. I meet the village policeman in fur boots and anorak. Suddenly, I hear an engine. Out of the mist appears a red caterpillar tractor keeping the village road free from new snow and pressing the old layers well down.

I walk higher up the village and go to another little guesthouse-cum-restaurant for a cup of verbena tea and a slice of tasty apple flan. On the way home, I have great difficulty in finding my way, what with the darkness and the steadily falling snow.

That night, on retiring, I can't see the normal dark, starlit sky; no moon and no glittering lights indicating the villages and the town further down the Rhone Valley. All is one eerie silent greyness, the snow falling inexhaustibly. My room, though, is friendly. The

walls are made of Arolla pinewood and a red and white check eiderdown on the bed matches the curtains. I turn down the thermostat of my radiator, open the balcony door and slip into bed—how well I sleep in the total stillness at that altitude!

What a surprise next morning — although it is no longer snowing now, it is a solemn, pale grey and white picture that meets my eye. I hardly recognise the village; the road seems a couple of feet higher. The railings of the wee bridge have disappeared under the snow. The signposts which were at eye level yesterday, are down at knee height. Tremendous industry everywhere. Local inhabitants and visitors trying to cut paths away from their front doors. Men on chalet roofs working hard in an effort to free chimneys. Youths with shovels shifting tons of snow from rooftops and balconies. The quaint little chapel on its solitary hill is embedded in an even deeper mass of white—no more than the very tops of the narrow window are visible. And where is the brook? The heavy snow loads on either side have caved in and now meet across the middle. Some of the smaller huts have completely disappeared, and the ice-rink is like a huge oblong tray of cottonwool. The ski racks outside shops and inns are only half their normal height. Where one just about distinguished a garden fence or hedge yesterday, a white quilt has smudged all outlines. To reach the doors of some of the shops and the local hairdresser's, one passes between cut-out passages like trenches in the first world war. And those weird lumpy figures at the roadside could be plastic rubbish bags dumped for collection by a horse-drawn sledge, or an abandoned toboggan—one really can't tell.

Every day the beauty is new

Where the village road ends, progress is very slow. Even on yesterday's path I sink into the soft snow up to my knees. Where there were marten and fox traces yesterday, there is nothing; the animals are hiding. Sheer beauty everywhere, but amazingly different from the day before.

Next morning complete transformation yet again: cobalt blue sky, radiant sunshine, the white expanse of the snow glittering and sparkling. Small birds chirp on the balcony and jackdaws make an almighty row in their delight. Soon it gets really hot, and one can lie in shirtsleeves on a deck-chair outside. The village has come to life again. Everybody seems to be out on skis, toboggan, on foot. All four ski-lifts are working non-stop. From the distance I can see little dark figures fitting down the mountainside from above the village; the exhilarating experience of a descent on skis. So many possibilities, too, in this part of the world, ranging from short runs down

from the Blue Lake to long, strenuous tours to the glacier and across the Hochfluh.

But even with the village astir, it is a leisurely style of life—no bustle, no haste. The sun is getting so hot that the snow starts to melt on the surface, and next day, after a freezing cold and starlit night, huge, dagger-sharp icicles hang from roof edges and balconies. Chilly sculptures reflecting the sunlight and shedding cool drops in the warmth.

And there, on the other side of the Rhone Valley, the giant peaks rise majestically into the sky, reassuring despite their aloofness. How far away the roar of London's traffic seems, fog, smog, rush and ratrace!

Yes, a perfect holiday place.

COMMENT

SWISS PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE

One of the traditions of Swiss parliament is that non-retiring federal councillors must be automatically re-elected at the start of a new four-year legislature. Another parliamentary usage is to refrain from verbal outbursts and slanging matches. Personal feelings are not allowed to show and the Swiss Chambers are probably the quietest legislative assemblies in modern democracy. The chairman of each House never has to call to order or intervene to safeguard their "dignity", as happens occasionally at the House of Commons. The spectators up in the gallery have to be content with rather dry, intellectual pleasures.

All this is part of Swiss parliamentary etiquette. It is a tradition to which most people involved in the life of Parliament are dearly attached. To show just how true this is, the readers of "La Suisse" read an astonishing piece of rhetoric by one of the top French-speaking experts on federal affairs, Edouard Perron, in his report on the government's election last December. The outcome of the vote in Federal Assembly was namely the re-election of six federal councillors, the election of Mr. Nelio Celio as President for 1972 and the election of Mr. Kurt Furgler as Christian Democrat federal councillor, who succeeds Mr. Ludwig Von Moos. But the incident for which many will remember the elections was that Mr. Pierre Graber, only elected a year ago in succession to Mr. Willy Spuhler, was elected by a very small majority and held his seat at the Federal Council because of a high number of abstentions. This is Edouard Perron's description of the proceedings:

"Until then (the re-elections of Mr. Brugger and Mr. Celio) everything had followed its normal course. But then came Mr. Graber's turn and

with it an incident which may have very serious consequences indeed; Mr. Graber only obtained 114 votes out of 196 validly expressed; 47 went to Mr. Olivier Reverdin, 51 to Mr. Schuermann and 46 to Mr. Huerlimann. The humiliation inflicted on our foreign affairs minister is one of the most scandalous and unwarranted gestures ever committed by the Federal Assembly. Our representatives gave way to petty personal reactions imperiously forbidden by the political importance of the situation. Their duty was to strengthen and not weaken the position the person appointed to defend the interests of Switzerland against outside powers. This was true also in the days of Marcel Pilet-Golaz, who was supremely unpopular, in parliamentary terms, in that he never cultivated the base alliances so highly valued in the Assembly. The belief was always firmly held, even then, that the importance of office came before the man who held it and that the dignity and unity of the country took precedence over ruffled vanity.

"Mr. Graber has undeniably made mistakes. He is accused of being distant, occasionally arrogant and—the worst blemish of all for the German-Swiss—of being ironical. He has been the victim of mean vengeance. His eminent service at a crucial time of our national existence, his intelligence and stature, more needed today than ever before, have been completely overlooked.

Will Mr. Graber accept to continue his task after having suffered a humiliation which, through his person, has also soiled the image of our country? No one knows. There a few men among our political elite who can legitimately claim to represent our country better than he does.

"After this lamentable show of unconsciousness, Parliament proceeded with the election of Mr. Von Moos' successor . . ."

Mr. Perron must have been relieved by the turn of succeeding events, which showed that Mr. Graber's near shave did not have the serious political consequences he had feared and that our foreign minister certainly did not give up his job.

It is impossible to read prose of this kind in the British Press today. Maybe in the days of Addison. The article is admirably Swiss and has all the ingredients of a virtuous and traditionalistic outlook to politics. It fulminates against the lack of "duty", and "honesty" of parliamentarians. It patriotically denounces the threat to Swiss unity contained in their option to be personal. It rather touchingly extols the qualities of one man and is generally carried away by lofty moral ideals.

On the face of it, one finds it hard to understand why a journalist should have been incensed by parliamentarians voting as they felt in what was almost an individual vote, inasmuch as it was unconnected with party politics. If some people did not like the way Mr. Graber was running Swiss foreign policy, then why shouldn't they express it?

However, matters are complicated by the existence of a coalition government. Mr. Graber could not have been replaced by a person from any party. His successor had to be a socialist in order to keep the political balance at the Federal Council. Moreover, the linguistic balance had to be maintained. Mr. Graber was the Socialist candidate and other persons elected to his office would have been outside the party ticket or even a non-Socialist. Representatives were therefore being naughty by not supporting Mr. Graber because his non-re-election would have created many difficulties of procedure and wasted time. Mr. Perron was therefore right to comment that parliamentarians who had waived their

suffrage to Mr. Graber had been rather irresponsible.

All this shows that Swiss parliamentary practice is rather rigid. There are probably more usages restricting parliamentary freedom in Berne than at Westminster. The existence of 10 parties annihilates the notion of "opposition", hence the possibility of lively debates. The Coalition at Government means that "question time" is not a party issue. It is the two Chambers facing the Federal Council and not an opposition party against the party in power (no questions ever have to be rigged!). The high degree of civility ruling under the cupola of the Federal Palace is inherent to its multi-party system and the collegial nature of a coalition government.

Many people have deplored the absence of real opposition at Swiss parliament. Everything is done by consent—quietly, intelligently and unemotionally. Debates are objective. One reason may be that issues facing the Swiss government are not always as crucial as those facing the British government. But even if Switzerland were hit by a serious crisis, proceedings would remain very civil. The absence of opposition and various usages of Swiss parliament ensure that it is a particularly smooth and efficient machinery, passing a considerable amount of legislation during its short sessions. On the other hand, it is "boring".

The House of Commons is perhaps more lively because there is more scope for parliamentary performance and human nature is given more chance to express itself. But the fact that the Opposition feels an obligation to "oppose" rightly or wrongly leads to lively debates, but also to many wasted words.

(PMB)

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1002