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A PREMIERE BY THE LAKE by Yole Bowman

Anyone who has been to Brissago, can understand why it is called The Pearl of the Lago Maggiore. It is a small town now, split by a wide road carrying heavy traffic, especially during the summer.

At the time of which I am speaking, it was still an enchanting little village, resting on the very toe of one of the last Alps, before giving way to the Lombardy Plain.

My mother, a pretty little peasant from Northern Italy, had come to this place to work at the tobacco factory, to escape her sisters and step-mothers, of whom she seemed to have a multitude. There were three factories in her day, she worked at the largest of these; that was before she finally came to England. It was in Brissago that she met my father, a true Brussaghese.

Often, when we were alone together in later years, she would tell me tales of her youth in this charming backwater. We would sing the old familiar songs, these would bring memories flooding back. How she first fell in love with my father, when he used to go out fishing in his boat, he had a passion for boats, and she could here him sing out there on the lake. He had a lovely voice.

Brissago even then, had lovely villas all along the lake-side or clinging to the mountain side. A very new and resplendent Grand Hotel. This had a strange history; it was said to be cursed, because the first owners had had their alsatian dog baptised in the Chapel. To this Hotel would come the society of Milan.

It was to Brissago that Ruggiero Leoncavallo came still smarting from his dismay and disappointment, when he realised that his Bohème, contemporary to Puccini's, had not received the same acclaim. To his dying days, he swore that Puccini had stolen the original from him. I am telling you all this because you, of course, know who Leoncavallo was, the composer of Pagliacci.

He had a beautiful villa built right in front and above the Grand Hotel, you can still see it there today. It had a huge studio to contain his grand piano. It was here that he wrote Zazá and perhaps La Mattinata. This charming song describing the dawn. Only someone who has known this little village as I do, would know he was putting into music the sunrise from the mountain across the lake. First the sun would touch the very tip of the Giridone, the last Alp, slowly creep down the mountain, it would accelerate at a faster and faster pace, until the whole village would be bathed in its warm embrace, finally the two small islands with their magnificent villa and splendid gardens would be engulfed. The Vaporetto, the small steamer that trundles up and down the lake, from Italy to Switzerland, would look like a toy in the vast expanse of water, trailing its minute plume of foam.

What a wonderful spot to choose for a premiere, al fresco, of course.

From Milan came all the stars and entourage of the Scala, as well as the society, the followers and hangers-on. For weeks all had been excitement, in getting the setting ready and accommodating the great influx of spectators, which must have been a colossal task for so small a place.

When the great day came, all the village inhabitants managed to get into the square in front of the school-cum-town hall, or at the windows of those friends who were fortunate enough to look out upon the square.

As a child I learned that Switzerland had become an important manufacturing country, owing greatly to the water power of its rivers and falls. I also learned that in the west the making of watches and clocks was the main industry and that Geneva was the commercial centre. I was told that Zurich was the largest town, that Basle, on the north-west frontier, was an important railway junction, that the Alps were "the playground of Europe" and that St. Moritz and Davos Platz were health resorts. All this knowledge was no doubt very useful education-wise but it did not impress me in the way that my visit to this country did. I had not been prepared by my school education for the wonderful ability the majority of Swiss people possess for making visitors feel com-

pletely wanted and as if the only desire the Swiss have is to make their visitors welcome. With all their needs so well satisfied it is no wonder to me that Switzerland is still, in this changing world, one of the most popular countries for folk wishing to enjoy themselves. No other country can surpass the goodwill of all the, and yes, I will say it again, efficiency that one is so grateful to meet up with when in this delightful country. Switzerland, I salute you ... you have what it takes, courtesy, cleanliness and good workers!

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