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FAMILY LIFE IN A SWISS VILLAGE

by Frances Boo

When a girl marries, she has to face the difficult task of getting to know and understand her mother-in-law, but when the mother-in-law does not even speak the same language, then the difficulties to be surmounted are multiplied.

When I was first taken to Switzerland to meet my in-laws, I began to appreciate how the foreign brides of English kings must have felt as they were set down in the midst of alien people.

When I arrived in the village, set on a plateau at the foot of the Jura mountains, I sensed that I was already the object of some curiosity. My husband's parents knew very little about the English; they had heard of their reserve and imagined their country to be industrial, grey, damp and permanently blanketed in fog. They found it hard to understand why their son had ever wanted to work there in preference to Switzerland and now they had to accept that he had chosen an English bride.

My husband's home is an old farm-house with a steeply sloping roof and an outside staircase leading to a gallery above. It appears to be enormous until one realises that one side is given over to the cowshed, granary and storerooms. Even so, there are still some rooms which are unused, only half the house is electrically wired and there is no running water, except for the cold tap in the kitchen.

When we lie in the pine-panelled bedroom with the windows open and the shutters closed, we can hear the sound of the cow-bells in the orchard and the splashing of the constantly running fountain. Generations of the family stare down at us from photographs on the walls and on the huge chest-of-drawers lies the Family Bible. In the corner of the room is the stove, which must be lit in winter if the sheets are not to become clammy with damp, or, on occasions, stiff with frost.

We wash in cold water at the china washstand, reminiscent of a scene from an Impressionist painting.

At the back of the house is a small room with no window and a large chimney at one end. It is here that the sides of bacon and various kinds of home-made sausage are hung to be smoked. The ash is never removed from the fireplace and even in summer the room has a tangy smell of burnt pinewood.

My father-in-law, in common with most of the villagers, owns a small plantation of pine trees on the edge of the village and so provides all the fuel for the stoves throughout the year. We often take a walk to the woods when he is working there, pushing a small, home-made handcart containing the tools. We make our way towards the

sound of the axe falling in a regular rhythm and at last come upon a clearing where the sun dapples the fallen trunks with patterns and highlights the golden tones of the bark-stripped wood. As the bark is peeled off, so a delicious, sharp smell of pine resin fills the air. Then we all begin to work as a team, stripping, chopping and rolling the logs down the steep slope of the wood, to be stacked in piles to dry at the edge.

Faggots of pine are also burnt in the large black stove in the kitchen. This stove serves many purposes, as it heats the ovens and hotplates, at the same time as providing warmth in the room and heating a small tank of water at the side, which has to be ladled out and refilled by hand. Above the stove is a hood and across this are strung lines of drying haricot beans, apple rings or herbs, according to the season.

There is always some part of the garden reserved for the growing of a variety of herbs, which are not only used in cooking, but are also dried to use in the making of infusions and tisanes, the country remedies for many disorders. Some of the ingredients for these are also gathered from the fields and woods and hang in bunches or in clean cotton bags from the rafters of the attics.

The services of the local 'guérisseurs' are still sought by the country people, and it is extraordinary how their 'cures' often do seem to be more effective and less drastic than some modern medicines. In fact, sometimes it appears that the doctor is only called as a last resort.

I recall the case of a particularly plump girl in a nearby village who took to her bed with severe abdominal pains. As these became more acute, and drinks of camomile tea seemed to have no effect, her frantic mother sent for the doctor. He arrived in haste to find the woman in a state of great embarrassment, apologising profusely, to the accompaniment of the lusty cries of a newborn infant, saying: "I'm so sorry doctor, it was the 'sage-femme' I should have sent for." It seems that as the girl was normally covered with rolls of fat, everyone, including the ignorant girl herself, had been unaware of her pregnant state.

The villages are far enough removed from the town for the events of the lives of their members to provide a talking-point for the rest of the community. The postman is often the one to relay any item of news, especially if there has been a death.

The ritual of mourning is still carried on in the villages, especially if the death has been at home, when friends and relations will go to pay their last respects. Once the funeral wake is over, then comes the practical business of disposing

of the belongings of the deceased. All those who are to be favoured with an offering await their turn to be invited to the house to take their pick.

One year when we returned, this procedure was still taking place, several months after the death of an eccentric old lady, who had incensed all her relations by leaving her money and land to an old farmer with whom she once had an affair. In addition, the house was filled, from cellar to attic, with everything she and her mother and father had ever possessed, all carefully wrapped in paper and packed in cupboards, drawers, boxes and trunks. My mother-in-law returned from her visit, with tales of trunks of boots and army rifles, drawers full of yellowing nightdresses and piles of ancient newspapers — a collector's paradise!

It is interesting to visit the graveyard and to examine the graves. My husband remembers many of those who are buried there and tells us their stories. The most tragic is of the boy of 14, who was struck by freak lightning from a single cloud in an otherwise clear sky. He was picking cherries and his younger brother, further down the tree, lived to tell the tale.

After a certain number of years, the people are allowed to remove the stone kerbs surrounding the graves, and it is incongruous to see them in the gardens, being used as cold frames for the plants.

One person who tried to impress on me the importance of tradition and the family was Tante Eugénie, my father-in-law's godmother. She lived alone in an imposing house in a village en route to the nearest market town. Two flights of steep steps rose opposite each other to the solid front door, whose glass panels were protected by handworked wrought iron. Inside, the house was cool and dim, the tiled passages uncarpeted and the light filtered through the half-closed shutters. Dressed always in black, Tante Eugénie led the way to the morning or afternoon parlour, where the ritual was always the same.

Enquiries were made about the health and welfare of each member of the family, then the photograph albums were produced; huge, leather-bound books which fastened with a clasp. I was always reminded of the Book of Genesis as we were taken back to the Canton of origin, through each generation and branch of the family. It was as though, by hearing it often enough, the surviving members would be able to pass on the information to the next generation.

I find the Swiss a particularly patriotic nation and they take their annual National Day very seriously. A huge bonfire is built on a high point in the village. Out come the flags, the candle

lanterns and the national costumes and a big supper is prepared.

As darkness falls, everyone gathers on the hilltop, lighting their way with the lanterns and carrying the fireworks which will be let off as a grand finale. The village pastor steps forward and delivers a patriotic speech. The men's choir strikes up with stirring traditional songs and then from all the neighbouring villages comes

the sound of firecrackers and the light of the bonfires flares up, blazes brightly and finally dies away to a soft, red glow.

As we go back home to sit round the kitchen table, drinking to the glories of Switzerland with a home-made liqueur, I feel proud and humble to think that I have been accepted into this circle of simple, hard-working people.

Ski-ing without tears

Like to learn Langlauf ski-ing in Switzerland? It can be done only half an hour's drive away from Berne's city centre. The ski-touring and cross-country instruction centres at Schwarzenbühl, Riffenmatt and Ottenleuebad will again be in operation this winter.

And you don't even have to own your own equipment — it can all be rented on the spot. Following last year's successful introduction of a floodlit trail for night ski-ing at Riffenmatt, Schwarzenbühl now offers the same facility. At Ottenleuebad there are weekend and family courses, ski-touring weeks and guided ski tours. Another attraction is the 30-mile Langlauf network, double tracked and clearly marked along the entire route.

Graubuenden is tops

The Graubuenden area is the most popular tourist region of Switzerland, according to a report just released by the Swiss Hotel Association.

The report, based on 1974 statistics, shows that 6.5 million overnights were spent in Graubuenden by Swiss and foreign tourists.

Next in popularity was the Lake Geneva region (5.4 million), followed by Berne (4.1 million), the Valais and Central Switzerland (each 3.6 million), Zurich and Ticino (each 3 million), Northeast Switzerland (2.2 million), Northwest Switzerland (1.9 million) and the Freiburg-Neuchatel-Bernese Jura region (841,000).

Hotel incentive

Switzerland's Ambassador Service Hotels group is offering free accommodation — to guests first paying for at least nine nights at any of the group's 80 hotels.

The decision to launch the scheme on nationwide basis was approved at the group's recent annual assembly in Basle,

and follows its successful introduction among ASH hotels in the Valais region of Switzerland.

The only condition is that the nine paid nights must be spent at at least five different hotels.

Under the scheme each guest is issued with a Hotel Pass at the first ASH hotel in which he stays. The pass is stamped every time the guest stays one night in one of the group's hotels, and after nine stamps have been collected the 10th night (bed and breakfast) comes free.

The Hotel Pass is valid for two years from the first date stamp.

ASH executive manager, Dr. Peter Kuehler, said it was hoped to launch the nationwide scheme — to be called Ambassador Tour — in early 1976.

Lausanne in a holiday mood

The 18th International Exhibition of Tourism and Holidays will be held at the Palais de Beaulieu in Lausanne from 28th February to 7th March, 1976. Larger and more varied than before, this popular exhibition promises to be particularly brilliant and will include all the traditional sectors: camping, caravans, gardening tools and accessories, swimming pools, etc.

Among the many attractive features of this event, mention should also be made of a large nautical sector, an exhibition of photographic and movie equipment, and a tourist section, where visitors will be able to dream and make their choice among the many tempting suggestions each more exciting than the next.

More snow

SNOW 75 — the first international exhibition devoted exclusively to the world of winter sports, which closed in Basle last month — is to become an annual event in the Swiss city.

Originally planned as a five-day event, SNOW 75 was later extended into a nine-day exhibition and attracted more than 60,000 paying visitors.

Said exhibition director Dr. Frédéric P. Walthard: "Despite some

gaps, understandable with a new event, we consider SNOW 75 to have been the successful realisation of a new exhibition idea — and one that can certainly be developed in the future.

"SNOW 75 was of particular importance at a time when increasing difficulties are facing tourism in all countries. At SNOW 76 the tourism sector will be enlarged."

Nine countries were represented at SNOW 75, and increased participation is expected next year.

SNOW 76 will be held in Basle from 23rd to 31st October.

Lugano invites

The southern Swiss resort of Lugano has announced a series of "rock-bottom rates" for hotel guests this winter.

Weekly arrangements up to the end of March cost from Sw.Fr. 120 for bed and breakfast, from Sw.Fr. 180 for half board and from Sw.Fr. 210 for full board. Children between seven and 12 years have a 30 per cent reduction and children under seven a 50 per cent reduction.

Hotels are also offering a "special surprise" arrangement for honeymooners.

The rates include unlimited travel on lake steamers and some other local transport undertakings.

For details contact Lugano's tourist office direct.

School moves

The Swiss Hotel School in Lausanne — established in 1893 as the first hotel school in the world — has moved into new Sw.Fr. 30 million premises.

The new premises are at Chalet-à-Gobet, six miles from Lausanne city centre, and were completed 18 months after the laying of the foundation stone.

When the original school opened 82 years ago, it had 27 students. Since then 18,000 students from 95 countries have been taught in Lausanne, and the new premises can take up to 450 students at any one time.

The new four-storey premises include 28 class and study rooms, a language laboratory, library, a

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