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A Greeting from an unexpected quarter

A FRIEND'S THOUGHTS ON 1st AUGUST

By Peter E. Slater

August 1st, 1972, is a day that I shall remember for the rest of my life. Outwardly, it was a normal hot, sunny August day like any other, but it was also Switzerland's national day and our last chance to see our friends 'en masse' before we had to leave the country that we had come to love so much.

We had already vacated the old farm-house, which had been our home for two very happy years despite our 'contretemps' with the landlord, and we were spending our last few days with our good friends and neighbours, Georges and Germaine Ledermann, at their farm at the entrance to the valley. Our pets had been taken to their new homes with friends rather than subject them to the trauma of quarantine kennels and, in that strange, uncanny way of animals, they seemed to sense what was happening and why, and they settled into their new homes without any trouble.

Aubonne lay simmering in the heat. The sky was a cloudless blue and the cows sought out the patches of shade under the trees. Preparations for the evening's festivities were well under way when one of the cows in the cowshed decided to calve. Everyone came to lend a hand with the proceedings and I found myself holding the cow's tail while the

vet and the others heaved on a rope and tried to extricate the calf. I got my foot trodden on which, since I was only wearing sandals, was not very comfortable.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the vet and his helpers, the calf stuck fast and had to be sacrificed to save the cow. It seemed as if the run of bad luck that we were experiencing was also infecting our friends. For a while an atmosphere of gloom descended on the gathering which was only dispelled by the arrival of more friends from Geneva, among them Pierre Marchesi, who could make a dead man laugh with his jokes.

By the time the evening shadows lengthened over the valley, a veritable cross-section of Swiss society was represented at the party. There were bankers to farm workers, restaurateurs to waiters, and a sprinkling of foreigners like ourselves including the Director of one of the International organizations and his family.

As soon as it was dark enough, the bonfire was lit and the festivities began in earnest. Pierre Marchesi addressed the assembled company and made flattering references to ourselves, which both delighted us and made us grateful that the darkness hid our blushes.

Towards the end of the festivities when only close friends remained, I was called over by a group of the menfolk and told that we had been friends long enough to be allowed to address them as

"tu" - but first we must "Schmölitz"! Perhaps it was the wine that I had already drunk; perhaps it was the mood I was in; in any event, although I completed the ceremony, I don't remember much more until I awoke in the cowshed - without the hangover that my wife said I richly deserved.

Despite my lapse, it had been a memorable day, part sad, part glad. We had been among FRIENDS and had been treated as such. People tell me that the Swiss are a smug, self-centred race who are hard to make friends with. We lived among them for two and a half years, visited them in their homes and entertained them in ours and were allowed to call them "tu". How much friendlier can you get?

We were considered almost as part of the family by many of our friends and we considered ourselves to be Aubonneois. It used to be something of a shock to be reminded that we were British. It is any wonder that we want desperately to return and make our home in Switzerland?

Mr. Slater tells us that he is intending to publish a book about his experiences in Switzerland. If the above extract is anything to go by it should be well worth reading. We thank Mr. Slater for allowing us to publish this foretaste and look forward to publishing further extracts and to reviewing the book in these columns.

Editor.

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