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Springtime in Switzerland

AN ancient spring custom in the Romansch-speaking Canton of the Grisons is known as Charlandamarz, which originates from the Roman New Year's Day.

In the Engadine and Oberhalbstein regions, children dressed in fancy or folk costumes drive out the demon of winter with an ear-splitting cacophony of cowbells, the cracking of whips and the rasping of rattles.

This exorcism of the evil spirit of winter dates back to pagan times. But over the years, the custom has undergone change and has been adapted to present-day life.

Although originally a festival for boys, now girls take an active part.

And while in olden times flour, chestnuts, beans and other foods were collected from which mothers would prepare for the children a big feast, today cash is collected to provide the local youngsters with appropriate entertainment.

IN Canton Valais, the men of the Val d'Anniviers will soon be preparing the spring soil in the communal vineyards.

The slopes south of Sierre will resound with music of flutes and drums as the workers march in single file to the vineyards, armed with shovels, hews and other tools of their trade.

Before actually beginning their work, the men kneel and pray.

The music accompanies their labours throughout the long day, and tankards of cool, fresh Fendant – the racy white wine for which the Valais is famous – are passed around to quench the thirst.

The day ends, at sundown, as it began – with the men at prayer.

HOLY Week processions are common among Catholic communities, particularly in the Italian-

Spring not only heralds the re-awakening of nature; it also signifies celebration of Easter. And both are observed in a rich variety of deeply-rooted traditions and customs throughout Switzerland. Colin Farmer previews Easter and springtime ceremonies from the four language regions of the country.

speaking Canton of the Ticino. Widely acknowledged as the most moving of these are the solemn scenes staged in Mendrisio at the southernmost tip of Switzerland.

The first – on Maundy Thursday – re-enacts the journey of Christ to Calvary, burdened by his heavy wooden cross and followed by figures from the Bible and tunic-clad Roman soldiers.

The following day is devoted to a dignified procession of the clergy.

Similar Passion spectacles are staged in other parts of the

Canton, but the Mendrisio processions are the most renowned.

EASTER eggs feature prominently in many of the most popular customs in German-speaking Switzerland.

Some towns and villages stage egg races in which opposing individuals or teams have to collect eggs spread out over a set course and distance and return them – without breakages – to barrels or baskets.

Other attractions include egg markets, at which the public can learn the art of egg decorating.

An ancient but ever-popular pastime among the children of Zurich is the Eiertütschen – an egg-cracking competition.

Hard-boiled eggs are carefully selected for the toughness of their shells and the sharpness of the ends.

Opposing players take it in turn to strike at each other's hand-held egg until one is dented and becomes the property of the successful striker.

In another version of this game, one player tries to throw a coin at an opponent's egg so that it pierces the shell and sticks in the egg.

The winner takes proud possession of both egg and money.



A cacophony of cowbells in the Grisons



Above: Tunic-clad Romans in the Ticino

Below: Cracking eggs in Zurich

