

Notes and gleanings

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NOTES AND GLEANINGS.

By J.H.B.

Another Mountain Crumbling.

Only last autumn it was that a landslide from Monto Arbino buried a Ticinesi village. Now we hear that St. Nicolas, a village not far from Zermatt, is threatened by the same fate. The Geneva correspondent of the *Morning Post* writes:—

Another Swiss village is threatened with destruction through the crumbling away of an overhanging mountain. St. Nicolas, the ill-fated village in question, is situated in the valley of the same name between Zermatt and Stalden, and is dominated by the Friedriehorn on the east and the Rothorn on the west. The village is so completely shut in by mountains that for weeks in mid-winter the sun never reaches it.

Yesterday the landslide was more serious than previous ones which have occurred. Huge boulders suddenly became detached from the main body of the mountain, and rolled down with terrific speed and a noise like thunder, crashing through outlying parts of the village and completely demolishing in a single moment several barns, cow-sheds and other farm buildings, one peasant woman, tending cattle at the time, having a miraculous escape.

The authorities immediately sent engineers to the spot, and they report the entire village to be in danger owing to the probability of fresh landslides. The villagers have been ordered to make preparations to evacuate.

St. Nicolas was the scene of a terrible visitation in 1749, when an avalanche of snow suddenly overwhelmed it, wiping out the majority of the inhabitants. The time-honoured story has it that only the belfry of the church remained standing after the disaster, and that the bell tolled throughout the whole of the tragic night.

A Jungfrau Observatorium.

It seems that after all one of the dreams of the meteorologists and astronomers, namely, to have a permanent observation station on the Jungfrau-Massiv, is now within reach of realisation. As reported to the *Daily News* (Feb. 18th) from Geneva:—

The long-talked-of establishment of a scientific observatory on the Jungfrau is now about to be realised.

The Swiss Natural Sciences Society has succeeded in interesting a number of foreign societies, including the International Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, and about £20,000 has been promised.

Those at the observatory, which is to be established at a spot called "The Sphinx," near the railway terminus, will study meteorology, astronomy and human and animal biology under the special conditions of high altitudes."

Swiss Home of Printing.

We take things which we have known since childhood for granted. It must, therefore, be very difficult for most of us to think of a time when printing was not known, and writing an art practised only behind the walls of abbeys and priestly schools. So it is of interest to hear through an English paper—*The Sunday Times*—of an appeal for the preservation of the "Swiss Cot of Printing."

One of the homes of the craft of printing, the Château zu Truchessen von Wolhusen, at Munster, in the canton of Lucerne, Switzerland, is the subject of an appeal from a committee of scholars at Geneva, who desire to obtain funds for the purchase and preservation of the château.

The building is of considerable historical interest. Built in the days of Barbarossa and of Heinrich the Lion of Bavaria, it was at one time known for its great architectural beauty. Subsequently it was embellished by the famous Swiss scholar, Canon Helyas Helye of Laufon, who acquired it in the fifteenth century and set up there the first printing press in Switzerland, the products of which are still sought after by collectors.

It was two years after the death of Gutenberg, the "Father of Printing," at Mentz in 1468, and six years before Caxton brought the art of printing into England, that Helyas Helye achieved the great ambition of his life by building the first Swiss press. He moulded his types in lead, and his original wooden press remained in use for no less than 350 years.

The Pope's Swiss Guard.

Several English papers inform us that the Swiss Federal Council is in some difficulty with regard to the fact that as His Holiness the Pope is now again a temporal ruler, for a Swiss to serve in his military service has become a punishable offence. No doubt good-will and commonsense will overcome the threatened break of an old tradition. This is what the *Daily Express* (Feb. 15th) writes:—

The re-establishment of the Pope's temporal power placed the Swiss Government in a difficult position concerning the famous Swiss Guard at the Vatican.

The Swiss penal military code clearly states that every Swiss who, without authorisation of

the Federal Council, takes service in a foreign army will be punished by imprisonment. Officers and men of the Swiss Guard leaving and returning to Switzerland are liable, therefore, to be arrested in future at the frontier stations of Chiasso and Brigue.

It is probable that the Vatican will make a special demand at Berne for permission to maintain the Swiss Guard, but the question arises whether the Federal Government possesses authority to break the Federal law without consulting the people.

The Swiss Papal Guard has been entirely recruited from the Roman Catholic cantons of Fribourg and Valais for hundreds of years past, and the men are specially exempted from home military service.

Proportional Representation.

The case for retaining Proportional Representation in Northern Ireland was put forward in a letter to the *Manchester Guardian*. What interests me most in that letter is the fair way in which the experiences of Switzerland are quoted. Amongst other things the letter says:—

Switzerland is a country which, though small, is considerably larger than Northern Ireland, and it resembles Northern Ireland in having a diversity of religious opinion. In Switzerland there are three races, three languages and two religions, and in the past there have been very serious conflicts between the Catholics and Protestants. In Switzerland to-day the rights of minorities, political, religious, or racial, are recognised. All sections of the community are fairly represented in Parliament under a system of Proportional Representation. The Government contains members of different parties, of different religions, of different races. There is no party with a majority in Parliament. Nevertheless, Parliament works smoothly and the Government is stable. There is a real connection between this stability and the traditional regard for the rights of citizenship, the studied association of the whole nation with both Parliament and Government.

How Central Europe Keeps Warm.

After the last few weeks it is probably not too unkind of me to copy some paragraphs which have appeared in the *Daily Mirror* with regard to "keeping warm" in winter. I need not say anything about our English houses. It is only eight years since I lived in a Swiss house, and the remembrance of it is still too vivid to allow me to call my present residence a house. This is what the *Daily Mirror* (18th Feb.) says:—

Women of Western Europe have much to learn in the art of keeping warm. They do it much better in Central Europe, where the winter temperature reaches such dizzy depths and remains there more or less for a third of the year. The women of Budapest, or of Prague, easily adapt themselves to these conditions.

Every house, private or public, is kept at a delicious summer temperature, no wraps nor "woollies" being needed.

Their outdoor kit consists of a heavy fur coat, woollen gaiters and the warmest of cloth snowboots, pale beige, with high heels and stout soles of rubber to match.

Of course, there are the poor without fur coats. "How do you keep warm?" I once asked a chestnut roaster in a Budapest street. "I have fourteen skirts on me, and my boots," she said simply.

A Swiss friend staying in London was amazed at the number of houses where the water supply was frozen off. "Why do your architects design houses with the water tanks in such exposed places near the roof?" was one question I was asked and could not supply an adequate answer.

In Central Europe, where the winters are invariably very cold, waterpipes and tanks are placed in frost-proof positions.

Zermatt's First Winter Season.

To be able to keep the hotels open for more than one season means more profit, lower prices and more stable conditions for the employees. It is therefore of interest to hear that the opening of Zermatt for a Winter Season was a step in the right way. The correspondent of *The Times* (Feb. 16th) informs us as follows:—

Zermatt's first regular winter season has definitely been a success. The hotel accommodation and catering have been excellent and indoor and outdoor sport has been well organised. And there has been glorious weather since the beginning of the year.

Zermatt will unquestionably become one of the leading high alpine skiing resorts in Switzerland. In the first place, it offers the great advantage of being out of the range of the Föhn wind, so that it escapes the usual Christmas and end of January thaws. Secondly, it offers trained skiers a wide field of excursion and several interesting climbs. A few improvements should be made on the Gornergrat line so that trains can reach Rotenboden (9,124ft.), which would open to skiers the fine, easy snow-fields of the Riffelalp and Riffelberg and facili-

tate the climbing of the Gornergrat (10,289ft.). The descent from that summit to the Findelen valley has—all expert skiers are agreed—no equal in Switzerland: the slopes seem to have no limits, and, though on the north side, have plenty of sun.

Among the ski tours available there are those to the Bétemps Hut (9,190ft.), to the Lys Pass (14,030ft.), to Grunsee (7,580ft.) and Tufferen, to Schwarzsee (8,495ft.) and Staffelalp. Among the most interesting ascents is that of the Cima di Jazzi on Monte Rosa (12,527ft.) and those of the Breithorn (13,685ft.), the Saint Théodule Pass (10,900ft.), the Rimpfischhorn (13,790ft.), and the Mettelhorn (11,528 ft.) There are some excellent ski instructors for beginners at Zermatt. Some 30 Zermatt guides have now passed the examination and tests for the title of *guide skieur*. The services of the young Zermatt guides, who formed the military patrol which came out first at the Olympic Games at Chamonix in 1924, are also available for visitors.

Fashions in dress, expression in Art, even our outlook in philosophy, changes. Why, then, should the Winter Seasons in the Swiss Alps remain the same? Changes may be for the better or not. Not being able to see things for myself I am going to rely on what "An Habitué" writes in *Truth* (Feb. 20th) on

The Swiss Winter Season.

The Swiss winter sport season is changing a good deal in character. The Alps have become more popular and therefore more crowded. Railway facilities have rendered them easily accessible, while hotels now cater regularly for visitors who only stay in the Alps for as little as eight to ten days. But it is in the matter of indoor amusements that the change is even more marked. Jazz bands are now the rule; dancing is a regular part of the day's sport; fancy dress balls and other more elaborate entertainments are held as frequently as circumstances permit.

The result is natural. Expenses are tending to go up. This, in turn, reacts on the clientèle that frequents winter-sport resorts in that more is expected in return for the money spent. That process began immediately after the war. Dancing was then instituted on its present basis, and very soon grumbling was heard from hotel staffs over the longer hours of work. Within two seasons there took place the hotel employees' strike in the eastern Swiss resorts, with the inevitable consequence that the managers had to take on a 20 per cent. increase of personnel. Longer hours involved other increases in overhead charges until there followed the marked rise in pension rates, and this has come to stay.

Out of doors a somewhat similar change has been at work. More amusements are expected, and so the outlay on rinks and runs has gone up. Again, there has been a remarkable increase in competitions in every conceivable branch of winter sport. This is a pity, since it tends to detract from the importance and attraction of all the older, well-established skiing and skating races or championships, while the prize-lists all make for extra expense. Obviously, if every winter-sport resort—however mediocre may be its facilities and also its patrons in the sporting sense—breaks out into a weekly crop of prizes, the visitors will in the end pay the piper. This is regrettable because ski-ing has now taken such a hold on the fancy of most of those who have tried it that, for many genuine winter sportsmen, the Swiss winter holiday is becoming a serious financial problem. Yet it need not be so. By avoiding those resorts which are excessively boomed it should be possible to enjoy quite a good three weeks' holiday on ski for well under £25. It is very largely a matter of finding out where to go, and also a question of travelling by the cheaper routes. The Swiss hotels where this can be done still exist, although, alas, they are few in number. But most people who go to winter resorts are like sheep; they just follow the fashion—and pay for it!

Another feature of the Swiss season is that it is getting much longer in point of time. The best ski-ing period is mid-February, while good sport continues in many places lying about 4,500 feet until—in some years at least—the month of April. Yet everybody rushes out at Christmas. The ski-ing enthusiast might well consider the possibility of this later holiday. The winter sport "palaces" begin to close about the third week of February; some struggle into early March. But there are now knowing ski-runners who have discovered the trick. They know of some favourite quiet spot and small hotel; there they congregate to enjoy those amazing days when there is still "powder" snow both on the northern slopes and in the shade, while on the southern inclines there is that "spring" snow, the easiest stuff to ski on that can be encountered. Then it seems possible to experience once more the greater sense of remoteness and absence of a crowd that used to make those earlier winter sport seasons of pre-war days so wonderfully attractive.