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No. 10 Shunts at Oberwald in the summer of 1954.

Photo A.E.Hauser-Gubser

## The Doctor and the Inspection Car

*Nostalgic reminiscences of the Furka-Oberalp*

By A.E.Hauser-Gubser

**Andermatt** on the Furka-Oberalp Railway is one of the smaller holiday resorts of Switzerland, known above all to mountain climbers, minerologists, botanists and advanced skiers. Last, but not least, railway enthusiasts choose the place more and more for their activities.

My family spent most of their vacations there during the thirties for similar reasons. We stayed at my uncle's house, a five minutes walk to the station. Both my uncle, a professional soldier and a Colonel commanding a mountain rifle regiment and Dad, a surgeon and specialist for diseases of the human respiratory tract, were passionate climbers. Mom was a botanist with an university degree and Aunt a well known minerologist. Walter, my 15 year old cousin and myself, 14, were afflicted by chronic railway fever, as Dad used to say. My twelve year old

sister Lillian, an animal lover, preferred to spend her holidays at the farm of our friend George. His true profession was a locomotive driver on the Furka-Oberalp, the farm serving to augment his modest salary. Walter and I owe him more than we can ever express.

In the summer of 1939 the Furka-Oberalp was still steam operated, although preliminary work for electrification was in hand. My cousin and I spent many hours at Andermatt station watching the steam locomotives HG3/4 Nos.1-10 hauling the small rakes of dark red platform ended coaches or strings of freight wagons in faded liveries into the station. They used to attack the 110‰ gradient leading to the Oberalppass, starting just across the old Gotthard road, in a most dashing fashion, showering cinders on the nearby houses and gardens. My uncle always maintained that the





Afternoon train at Oberwald, summer 1939.

Photo S. Lory

housewives would hang out their laundry according to the FO timetable. *Si non e vero e trovato bene*. The trains fought their way slowly upwards, creating a thundering echo in the surrounding valleys, disappearing with a final blast on the whistle into the Butzen loop tunnel.

The Schöllenen Bahn (SchB) was still independent in 1939, and had been electrically operated from its opening on 12 June 1917. The small trains with their tiny locomotives brought summer guests to Andermatt from the SBB station at Göschenen, or freight cars for the army and the hotels. Our parents had bought holiday cards valid on both lines for Walter and I, and within limits we were allowed to roam freely by train.

For instance, we left Andermatt at 07:45 to arrive around 11:00 at Brig, then, as now, a railway paradise. Among the multiplicity of trains of the SBB and BLS, we found the real *Simplon-Orient Express*, usually hauled by an Ae4/7 locomotive. We were of course immensely impressed by the elegant Wagon-

Lits Pullman cars with their air of far off places. Ladies attired in the latest Parisian fashions looked out, plainly bored by the railway scene.

Mighty BLS Ae6/8 locomotives rolled by, hauling long heavy freight trains loaded with German coal for Italy. *Red Arrows* of the SBB arrived and left on their round trip. Outside, by the BVZ, we admired the red HGe4/4 electric rack locomotives Nos.11-15, built on a similar configuration to the Rhaetian Crocodiles, but lacking their prominent coupling rods. The attractive AB4 cars Nos 101-103 were also impressive, with their luxurious moveable seats in the first class saloon. We returned to Andermatt either by the *Glacier Express* or the afternoon combined passenger/freight train. The latter was well worth the much longer journey time since at almost every station shunting took place to drop or pick up a wagon or two.

Sometimes we took a train to Oberalpsee station, which in those days consisted of a straight track, a loop and two points, plus a rather imposing hotel/restaurant, the innkeeper





The newly formed train attacks the 11‰ gradient to Gletch, Summer 1954

Photo A.E.Hauser-Gubser

doubling up as stationmaster. We would sit amidst an unbelievable array of wild flowers of all varieties, waiting for the *Glacier Express*.

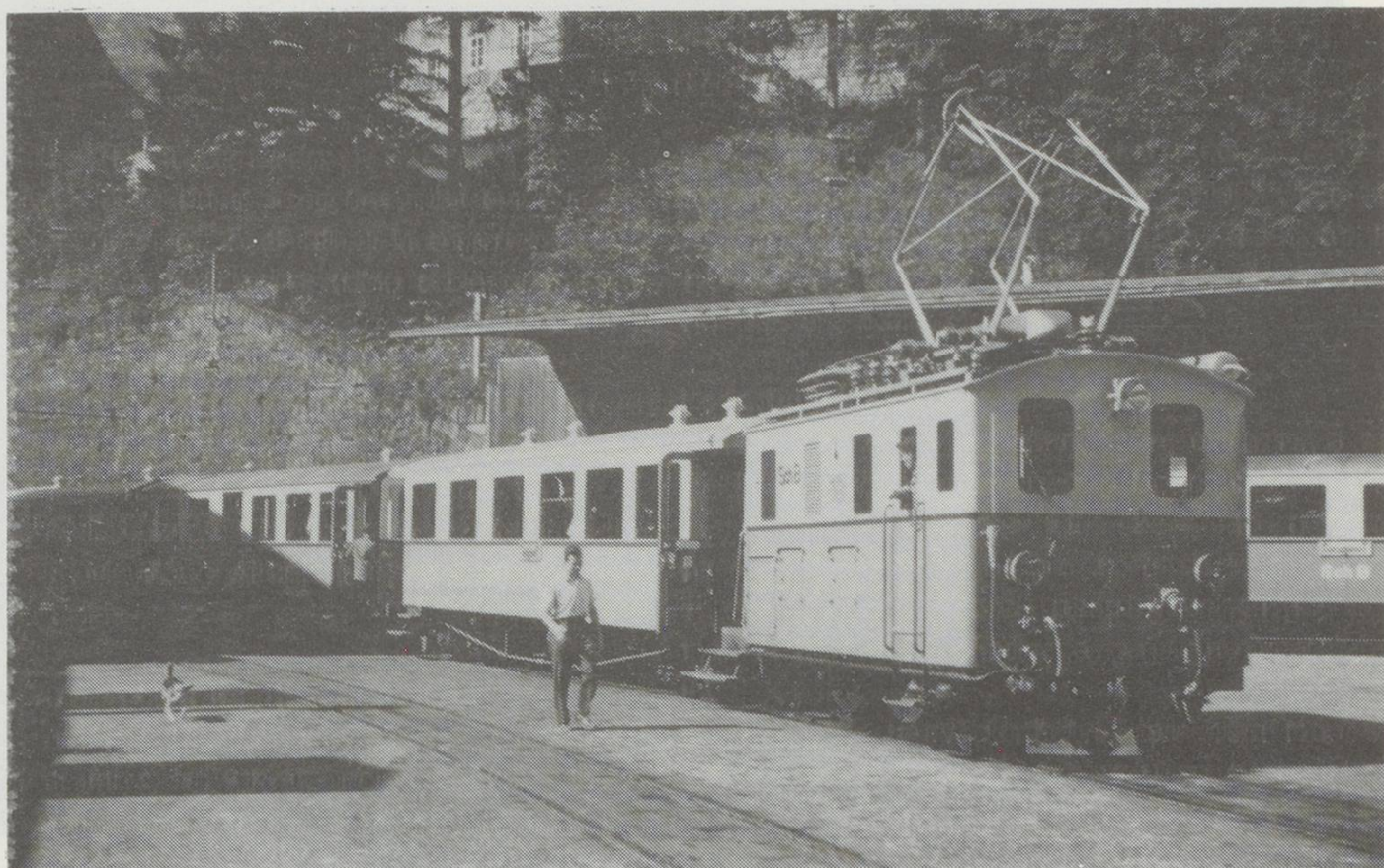
First we would hear the muffled beat of the engine's exhaust on the far-away eastbound train. Gradually, the sound would grow louder and be multiplied by the echo, the ever-blowing wind would add to the noise until, in a deafening crescendo, the whole would become a mighty roar as the train approached the station. Here the gradient eased to a mere 51‰ and the characteristic sound of a 4-cylinder compound locomotive could be easily detected. The train rolled into the station and came to a gentle halt. Immediately experienced passengers descended to raid the buffet, buying by preference the bilberry wine, an alcoholic beverage kept cool on ice, to be drunk with the upmost prudence, whilst the clanking of the feedwater pump rose above the conversation.

The westbound *Glacier* rode elegantly round the long curve of the Oberalpsee, steaming slowly into the station, with the dining

car at the far end of the train. The hitherto calm scene gave way to a frenzy of activity as an unique remarshalling operation took place at an altitude of 2033m in which the precious dining car was transferred from the westbound to the eastbound train, a process observed and commented upon by the passengers.

The stationmaster, his voice honed to an incomparable clarity during alpine winter storms, ordered the passengers to board their respective trains, the departure signal was given, the eastbound locomotive whistled and began to move, its dark red balcony and coaches mirrored in the Oberalpsee whilst passengers took their places in the dining car to wine and dine. Soon the train disappeared behind the Oberalp-Passhöhe into the Rhine valley. In the meantime the westbound train had also left, idling down the grade at the imposing speed of 20 km/h. But for the ever blowing wind, quiet had returned to the Oberalppass. The station tracks simmered in the midday sun and high above, far in the towering sky, a pair of eagles circled in search of prey.





Schöllenen Railway at Göschenen in 1948 with original locomotive and early stock.

Photo A.E.Hauser-Gubser

Other favourite spots were Göschenen, with the busy Gotthard traffic and the mighty Ae8/14 locomotives, Disentis and the Rhaetian Railway's steam and electric locomotives and Gletsch, a lonely summer station near the Rhone glacier, whose icy blue fingers were much nearer the railway than they are today.

On one occasion we rode to Tiefenbach, a lonely station at the east end of the summit tunnel to walk back to Realp, a hike of some six to seven kilometers along the steaming waters of the Tiefenbach Reuss and the railway line. We crossed railway bridges and snowfields where the snows of the 1938/9 winter still lay, avoided tunnels by means of detours finally to sit down on a slope covered with bilberry shrubs.

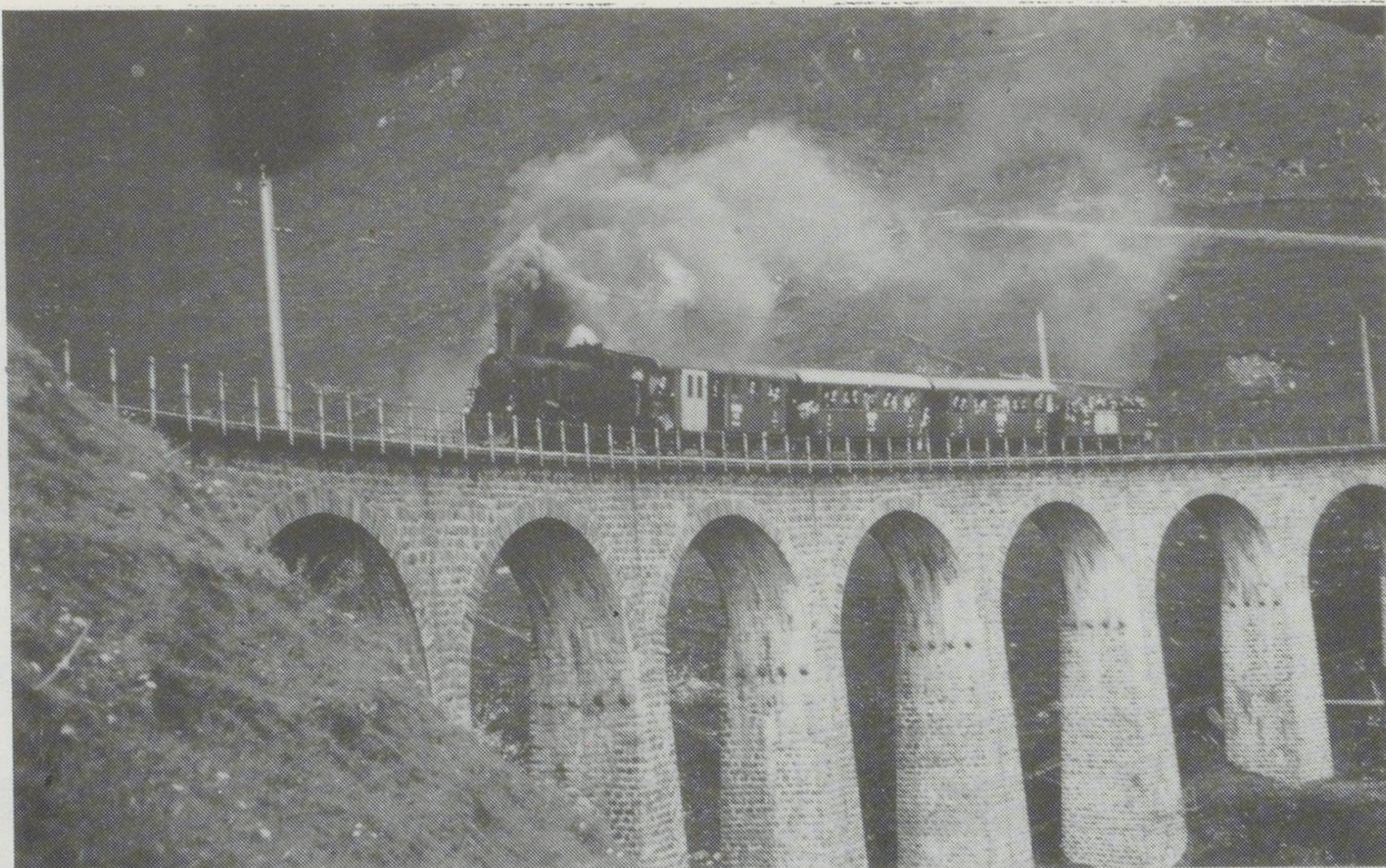
Trains would appear far down in the valley around a bend, fighting their way upwards, the black smoke shooting straight up in the air as they pounded up the steep grades. Despite the hard work, drivers and firemen found time to return our greetings with cheerful blasts on the whistle. As the trains rolled by in the bright

sunlight though this absolute wilderness, both my cousin and I felt immensely happy. We were greeted by a lonely ganger, walking the track, looking for faults in the track, rack and rail fixings, surprised to find strangers in this solitude and delighted to have a short chat.

At Realp we hoped to catch one of the two CFm2/2 motor cars Nos.21 and 22, introduced by the FO to reduce costs on poorly frequented trains. These had a baggage compartment behind the driver's cab, and friendly railwaymen allowed us to stay there and watch the line ahead.

During that August in 1939 the storm on the political horizon was recognisable, even to we children. For the first time, our parents openly discussed the inevitability of war and along the railway line we observed discreet preparations by army units and sections of the railway's building and maintenance department. Cableways for the transport of ammunition, provisions and soldiers were erected and then carefully camouflaged and during the night we could hear the valiant little engines fighting the





FO-special on the Val Bugnei Bridge, summer 1956.

Photo A.E.Hauser-Gubser

heavy gradients of the Oberalppass, hauling freight trains loaded with ammunition, stores and materials to the cableways or to other locations where they were met by long mule trains. Lying awake during the night, I could see the shower of sparks and the dim lights of the locomotives.

Before our holiday came to an end, the family council decided to once again visit Lake Tuma, the source of the Rhine and to return via Piz Badus to Nätschen station. Dad duly informed Andermatt's own doctor of our whereabouts in case something should happen that needed the presence of another doctor. We left early to cover most of the tour in the fresh morning air. When we arrived at Nätschen station at around 3pm, we were met by our friend, George. Andermatt's doctor had alerted the stationmaster half an hour before for an accident had occurred at Tschamutt; an FO employee had been gored by his bull. Dad's colleague was unable to attend the patient as he was already faced with a critical case involving an injured tourist. The Army hospital at

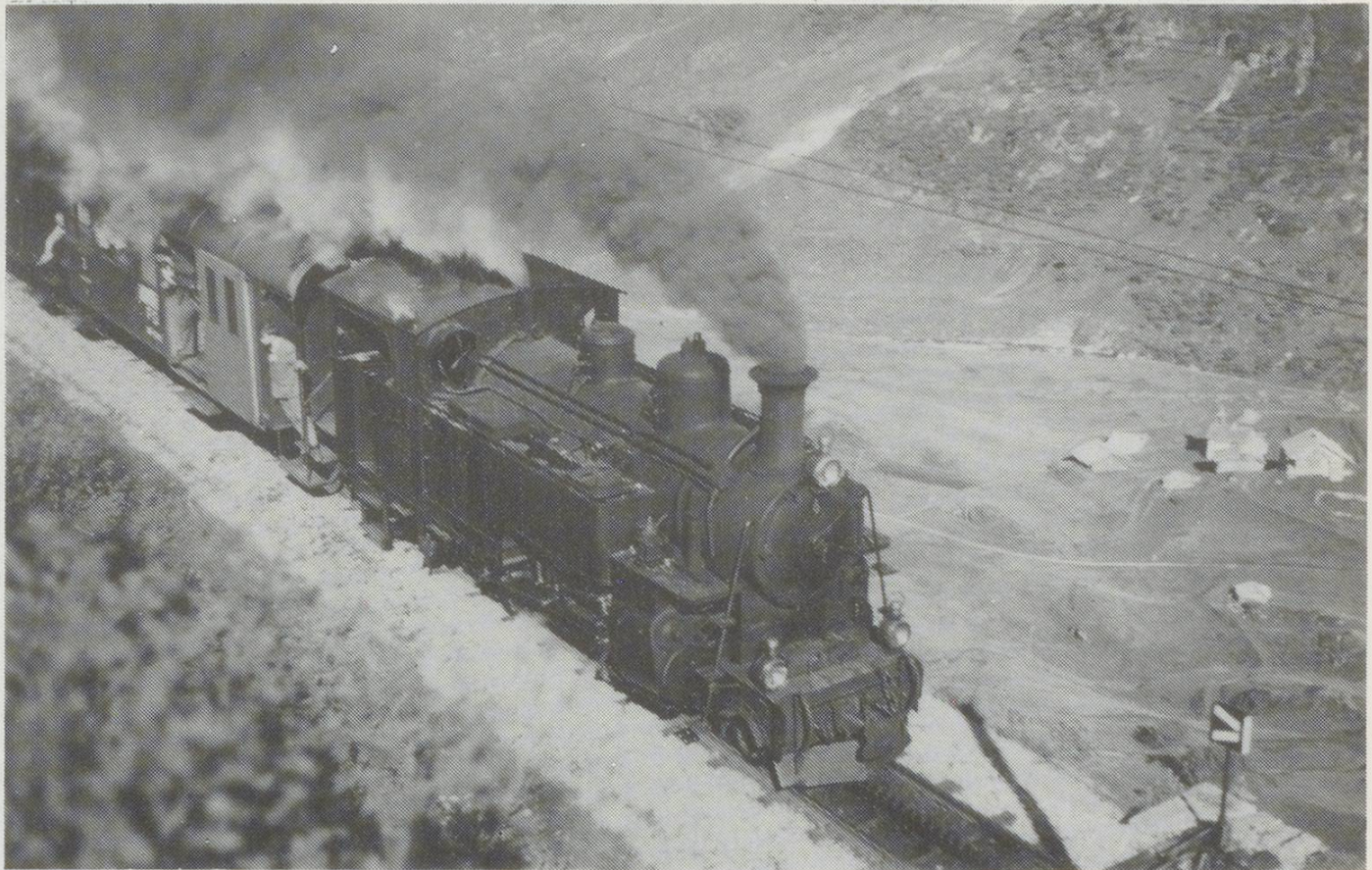
Andermatt had been warned and was standing by should it be necessary to bring the injured man there.

Dad, never one to take rash decisions, thought over this information and asked; "Is there any chance of immediately organising a private car or, better still, an ambulance?"

"No, doctor," was George's reply. "Nobody around here owns a car, Andermatt's doctor is away and the Army ambulances are taking part in your brother-in-law's regiment's exercises. But I might have a solution to this problem." He pointed to the inspection car, sitting on the spur track near a group of maintenance men who were preparing foundations for the overhead posts. "We could use the inspection trolley to reach the patient and to take him to Andermatt if necessary."

Dad was visibly disturbed; obviously he had no confidence at all in this antiquated ugly looking vehicle. "Is that contraption safe?" he demanded. "How in God's name do you expect to carry a seriously injured man in it to Andermatt?"





FO-special enters Tschamutt, summer 1956. Rhine valley in the background.

Photo A.E.Hauser-Gubser

"Doctor," George replied calmly, "that inspection car is used every day and we've never had an accident. To carry the injured man, I propose to take a mattress from the section car and some of the camouflage netting they're using on the cableways. The bed will be supported by the car's four stanchions that hold up the rain cover, with the netting arranged so that any shocks are absorbed and swaying is prevented."

The sectionmaster nodded approvingly. "It's a good idea, especially when we consider the time aspect. We can leave immediately and I will provide the necessary material."

Dad searched for the medical case he always carried in his rucksack and said; "Well, let's go!" A shade reluctantly, he boarded the car, muttering something we did not understand, and sat down gingerly on the wooden bench. George started the engine, which spluttered noisily into life, ejecting clouds of blue fumes and the strange vehicle moved slowly out of the station. The rack wheel engaged, the car shuddered, accelerated and

disappeared behind the hill in the direction of Oberalppass and Tschamutt with Dad holding grimly onto the bench's railings.

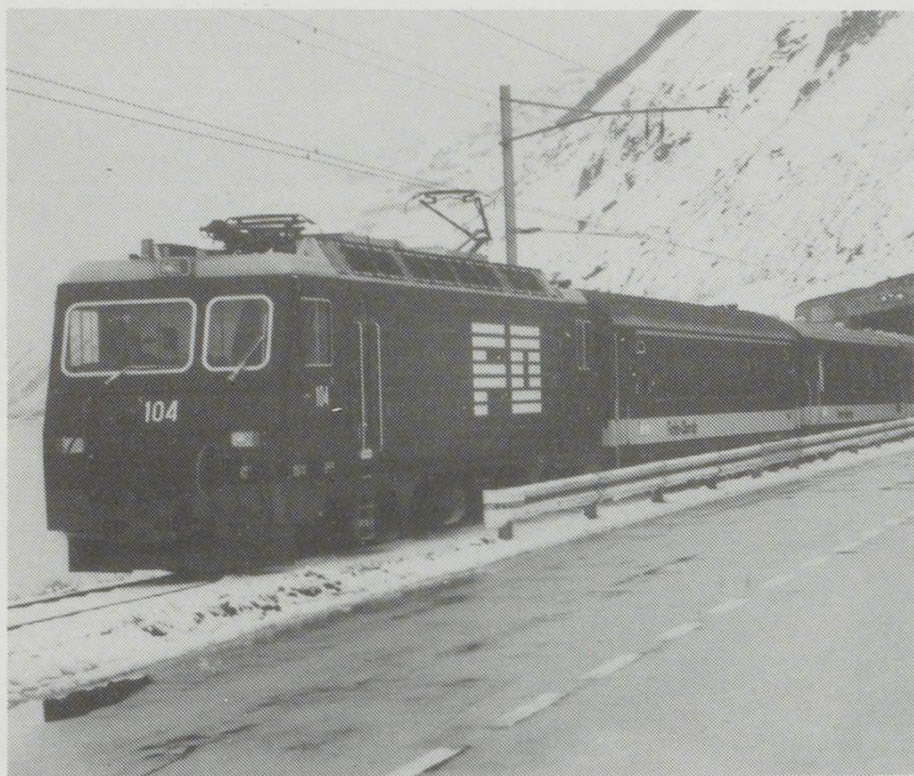
"And what happens if there's another train on the line," Cousin Walter asked suddenly. There was consternation on Mum's face.

We went to the stationmaster who allayed our fears. "All taken care of. When we realised that the inspection car was the best possible answer, I immediately phoned Rueras and Andermatt, explaining the situation. Rueras will tell the driver of your train to wait at Tschamutt until the Doctor and George have arrived. Andermatt will hold all trains until George, the Doctor and the patient have returned."

We begged Mom and Aunt to stay until the return of George and Dad, but to no avail. "You know how furious your Father gets when someone is gaping at a helpless, injured human being. We return by our train."

It was fifteen minutes late. The driver confirmed that George and Dad had arrived safely at Tschamutt. Back in Andermatt, we used Dad's and Uncle's binoculars to scan the line





The Oberalppass, June 1991. Modern FO train leaving avalanche shelter behind HGe4/4" No.104.

Photo A.E.Hauser-Gubser

downwards to Andermatt and around 4:15pm the inspection car clattered down, flying a yellow flag. We could see Dad and George quite clearly, as well as the camouflage net, but not the patient. We had the impression the car was going at rather a high speed. Half an hour later George phoned to tell us that all had gone well and that Dad was operating on the injured man in the Army hospital.

Late that evening, very tired but happy, Dad returned home. "Yes," he replied to our eager questions, "the patient is well, but still weak. His age, 28 and excellent physical condition will help his recovery enormously."

"But darling, just what did you say when you boarded the inspection car?" asked a smiling Mom.

"Oh that falls under the terms of professional secrecy," said Dad. We knew then that he had cursed, something forbidden to we children.

"You did well, considering you had to work under difficult conditions," soothed Mom.

"Oh, I don't know," Dad replied. "First and foremost the credit should go to George. Whilst

the operation wasn't a difficult one, it was vital to get the patient to hospital as fast as possible and to carry him without any shocks. As to the speed, George had probably broken every rule in the book, but interestingly enough, I felt safer and safer the longer our ride lasted. The patient was perfectly well in his hanging bed and the springs absorbed all shocks. As to that inspection car, it probably served during the building of the FO, the alarming construction was so noisy I had to shout my instructions into George's ear."

"And how did you get the patient to the hospital?" asked my Aunt.

"Once again it was George who saved the day. When we

passed Nâtschen station he slowed down and shouted to them to phone the hospital to have stretcher bearers waiting at Andermatt."

Later I asked George whether he had really broken the speed regulations. His eyes twinkled. "But Alfred, I had no speedometer," he replied with a broad smile.

A few days later, we returned home. The Second World War had started.

### *Envoi*

Today, 53 years later, the FO is a modern and efficiently managed railway. We often recollect the memories of those golden summers. Alas, gone have the little steam locomotives with the shining brass parts and the smell of steam and cinder. Oberalpsee station has disappeared, swept away by an enormous avalanche in 1951, killing the owners of the hotel. Gone is the bilberry wine and the dining cars are now exchanged at Andermatt. But the eternal winds still blow on the Furka- and Oberalp-Passes, the wild flowers are still there and the spirit of the old FO is still alive. May the red trains ride forever..