

The lost valley

Autor(en): **Dickins, Douglas**

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THE LOST VALLEY.

By DOUGLAS DICKINS.

(The following is reprinted from the July issue of "Everybody's" by courtesy of the Editor.)

A large number of the people who go to Switzerland for their holidays this year will be content with the more cosmopolitan resorts, such as Montreux, Lucerne and Lugano. But there is another Switzerland, known to few; the Switzerland of the "lost valleys."

For example, just south of the Bernese Oberland massif, nestling in a narrow defile between the 13,000 foot summits of two mountains, the Bietschorn and the Breithorn, is a lonely and beautiful "lost valley," the home of some two thousand Catholic peasants, dwelling in wooden chalets in half a dozen villages.

Here persists a traditional way of life that is remarkable for being to a large extent communal. Much of the Alpine pasturage and the forests of larch and pine, are held in common by the villagers, and all have the right to pasture cattle and cut wood. With these rights go duties: the care of roads, bridges and mountain paths; the building of defences against avalanches; the cutting and transport of wood.

Each household has a "house sign," and these are drawn by lot when something needs doing. A list of signs posted up may detail a party for log-cutting; another on the door of the communal bakery specifies the rota for delivering fuel for the oven. In this bakery, each family in turn fills the great oven with their own bread and bakes enough to last two or three months. The round flat rye loaves are brick hard and have to be softened in buttermilk before eating.

This shared way of living gives a sense of security to all, but it is no paradise for escapists. Being at an altitude of from four to five thousand feet, the valley is under snow for a good third of the year. Then the cattle ruminant in their stables, often beneath their owners' chalet. There is still work to be done, however, for winter is the season of wood-cutting and hauling, of spinning and weaving cloth from local wool. It is the season of schooling, too. When summer comes the children enjoy six months' release, for every hand is needed in the Alps.

As the receding snowline creeps higher up the steep mountain slopes, and the Alpine flowers come into their own, the age-old cycle of Nature begins again. For brief summer's activity yields the cheese, the potatoes and rye, and hay that must sustain man and beast throughout the succeeding winter. And in such country it takes intensive cultivation to produce enough.

The experience of centuries (for the valley has been settled since pre-Roman times) dictates the routine. On the lower slopes, by the banks of the River Lonza as it rushes whitish-green from the melting glacier, small fields are tilled and fruit trees grow. The gentle

brown and white cows are led out to browse on any patch of grass that can be spared. The best is reserved for hay.

In June begins the annual "migration." The cattle are driven up the flowery slopes to a height of over five thousand feet.

In July they go higher still, and graze above the tree-line. They come down in stages, returning to the valley by early October. During this time the hay must be gathered, once in the high Alps, and twice in the valley.

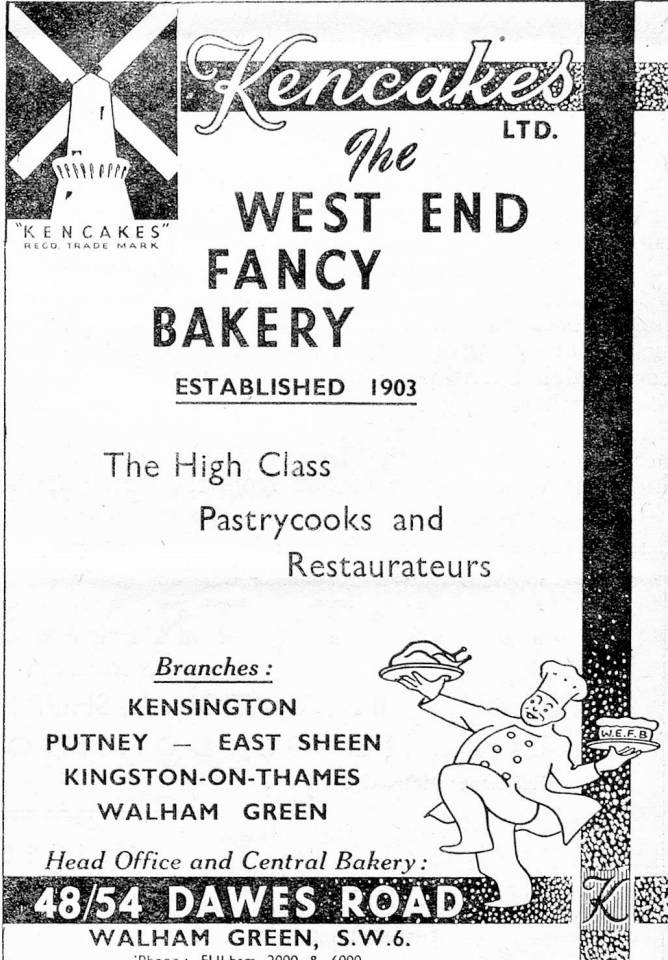
While the cattle are still on the "middle Alp," peasants climb twice daily to milk them, carrying the Milk down on their backs in flat wooden containers made from pine, bound with strips of larch.

In midsummer the herdsmen — and women — must be prepared for a frugal and isolated life, living in little wooden chalets-cum-stables. Often they take a goat with them to provide their daily milk, so that the whole output of the cows can be reserved for cheese-making, which is done on the spot in huge cauldrons over wood fires. Their spiritual needs are met by chapels in these summer hamlets, and the venerable Prior Siegen, the pastor of Kippel, the largest village, has a parish which extends from the river bed to the mountain peaks.

Although the cattle are owned by individual families, their milk is pooled, with few exceptions, in the communal dairy. In Kippel, only two families

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remain outside this scheme. In the dairy a man is employed on a salary basis to make butter and cheese, which is distributed once a month in proportion to the amount of milk contributed.

Very little is sold. Milk, butter, cheese, and rye bread; these form the staple diet, with a little meat, fruit, eggs and potatoes, also produced locally. The sturdy vigour of the inhabitants is the best tribute to the healthiness of their mode of life. Good teeth are universal, and tuberculosis is as rare as crime.

This valley of the Lötschental is very nearly self-sufficient; little need be imported save salt, sugar and coffee. But every man must be at home on skis or on the mountain, able to turn his hand to any job, from sawing wood (which is stacked with mathematical precision outside every house), to renovating his own chalet. For women, too, life is hard. Besides caring scrupulously for their homes, they help with the cattle and hay-making, spinning and weaving the wool of their flocks of sheep which graze on specially reserved areas at the head of the valley. Water supply is assured by springs which are piped into wooden troughs formed of hollowed-out tree trunks, placed in the village streets. Here clothes and utensils are washed, and cattle drink.

The villages are primitive. Hay-lofts appear in picturesque untidiness above stables, and middens overflow on to the narrow unpaved lanes. Granaries are built on stilts, surmounted by flat stones, to keep the rats out. Some of the oldest houses date from the fifteenth century. In those days they consisted of one storey only; windows were tiny and sanitation non-existent.

Additions have been made with the loving hands of generations of craftsmen, who have left the imprint of their Catholic faith in the devout inscriptions to be found inside and outside almost every building. All are built of the local larch wood, which the centuries have mellowed to a rich dark brown. A few are imposing buildings of three or four stories containing from two to four separate homes.

Electricity comes from a little generator worked by the river. Some houses have been fitted with modern electric cookers, baths, and sanitation; but all retain one feature of proved worth — the slow combustion stove which burns wood and warms the whole house. Many of these, of green serpentine stone, are centuries old.

In each village the houses cluster around the church as if seeking protection from the terror of the

avalanches. The whole valley suffers from this peril, which annually does much damage to the valuable forests. Wide swathes can be seen in the dark green of the conifers, where huge masses of snow have carried boulders, shrubs, branches, whole trees and chalets before them.

An entire summer hamlet of thirt-two chalets was swept away by a terrible avalanche in 1937, happily without loss of life. Even in midsummer, great masses of frozen snow and debris still lie across the river in the shaded depths of the valley. Between Kippel and another village, at a particularly exposed point of the road the embankment is provided with little refuges built into the stone facing.

Like all peasant peoples who live a hard and simple life, these valley dwellers dearly love a festival. Chief among these is the Feast of Corpus Christi, when the blessing of God is invoked on the Alps, the cattle, and all who live and work in the valley.

The men appear in spectacular medieval uniforms belonging to the ancient Bourbon states of Naples. These are relics of the time when the Swiss were the most famous mercenary soldiers in Europe. Veterans of those days carefully preserved their scarlet and white uniforms, with epaulettes and plumed helmets, which have been handed down from generation to generation. Some are the original uniforms and helmets, still spick and span; others are modern replicas.

For the day-long ceremonies, the little girls are dressed in white as for their first communion, and the older women in the sombre black costume of the valley, with curious black bonnets trimmed with gold lace and embroidery. In the morning an open-air service is held, and after lunch another inside Kippel's 700-year-old church of St. Martin.

Priests, villagers, band and grenadiers all join in a procession through the labyrinthine lanes of the village, and out among the fields, ablaze with flowers before the first lowland crop of hay is cut. The scene has the air of a medieval military parade, as the grenadiers with their communal banners line up, sound a fanfare on trumpets and fire a volley in salute.

The Lötschards live close to Nature — and to God. Public transport has not yet broken down the isolation of the Alps, nor tourism corrupted their proud traditions. But "progress" in the shape of tourist posters and hotels makes its insidious advances. How long will this "lost valley" of peace and harmony be able to resist them?

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