

Switzerland - "Union in partition"

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SWITZERLAND — "UNION IN PARTITION."

By CANON ROGER LLOYD.

(The following article is reprinted from the February issue of the "NINETEENTH CENTURY AND AFTER" by the courtesy of the Editor.)

'The English,' observes Miss Carola Oman in her fine biography of Nelson, 'with appetites whetted by several seasons' confinement, were pouring into the continent this autumn (1783) as they always did after the conclusion of a peace treaty.' A hundred and fifty years later many thousands of us poured ourselves into the Continent once more. Most of us chose Switzerland, and ever since we came home again we have found it difficult to stop talking about it. A Swiss holiday is an experience which goes deep and has emotional consequences which are not wholly pleasant and which do not seem to fade. To come back home after a fortnight there is rather like going back to a school to which one had become accustomed, but at which one has not been really happy; and waiting for the plane to Northolt at the Geneva airport brings sharply back to memory the old Thanet Schools Special which used to run from Victoria at the beginning of every term. A holiday in Switzerland is a cause of blissful content while you are there, but also of deep-rooted nostalgia once you get home.

This has happened to so many British citizens, and once the ban is lifted is likely to happen to so many more, that it is a phenomenon of some cultural and political significance, and is worth analysis. What is it in Switzerland which makes a British citizen who was previously quite contented with his lot become discontented with it as soon as he gets home? It is not only the contrast in food. Nobody in his senses expects that Britain which has borne the brunt of two world wars can feed as well as Switzerland which has fought in neither. It is not the contrast between Swiss cleanliness — so scrupulous, so gleaming, so invariable — and British shabbiness. Nor is it wholly accounted for by the unvarying charm, courtesy, and kindness of the Swiss to all their guests; for they behave like that to each other. Those who make too much of this are apt to have it pointed out to them (and with truth) that in Britain there is still plenty of honesty, courtesy, and kindness if one looks out for it. It is not even that in Switzerland no face is strained, and in Britain so many faces bear the outward and visible marks of years of trial.

But these contrasts, and so many others, add up to something that goes deeper than any of them. This is the sense one has as soon as one crosses the Swiss frontier, and which every day one spends there fortifies and deepens, that here is something which now exists nowhere else in Europe, a whole nation which lives as people are meant to live. They work very hard, all of them; one never sees anybody who is idle. But they work together in cheerful co-operation, and they seem to have no strikes. There is no horrible contrast between over and under privileged. They are exceedingly patriotic. Almost every chalet flies the Swiss flag. Their patriotism is that of a united people, and the achievement of this unity among a people which derive from three separate nationalities who, outside Switzerland, loathe each other, and who speak three separate languages, is astonishing. Switzerland must

be the only nation on record which is an harmonious unity in itself and yet has no language of its own.

The Swiss system of government has always interested the students of constitutional history from Lord Bryce onwards. Most of these students agree in attributing the phenomenal success of Swiss government to its consistent policy of the decentralisation of authority, so that the various cantons are more independent than any other units of local government in the rest of Europe, and yet all alike give an unquestioning obedience to the authority of the Federal Council in all the matters which it reserves to itself. So settled and steady has this system become that Switzerland appears to be that unique and blessed thing, a country without politics. Read a Swiss newspaper: the only politics in it are those of other nations. They have parties, it is true. The present Government is a coalition of them. They have elections. The lamp-posts of Geneva were full of posters a few months ago politely asking *Messieurs les Electeurs* to vote for *Les Socialistes*. But that campaign did not seem worth more than a couple of lines in a back page corner to the *Journal de Genève*, which was devoting all its front pages to critical articles about Swiss drama and reviews of books. The visitor from the west (or from the east if such were allowed to come) rubs his eyes with envious amazement. How wonderful to live in a country where government does its work so well that everybody is perfectly contented with the way affairs



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are managed, and where the divisive partisanships of politics do not exist because they are so completely irrelevant.

In consequence the common speech of the Swiss has no trace of the terrible division into 'we' and 'they,' and the ordinary citizen thinks of the government official and the civil servant not as his natural enemies, but as his partners in the service of Switzerland. In no country in Europe are anarchism on the one hand and revolution on the other so inconceivable as they are in Switzerland. The head waiter in a Geneva hotel was apologising to an English guest for being obliged to ask him for two food coupons before he served his meal.

'In Switzerland we are much better off for food than you in England, but still we have to have this coupon system. It is necessary for us, you understand, to keep the system for some time yet until we know what food we shall be able to count on.'

It was 'our' system, 'we' imposed it, and 'we' shall keep it as long as 'we' need it. In any other European country the waiter would instinctively have spoken of 'their' and 'they.' The same thing always happened when somebody, perhaps a clerk in the station booking office, was explaining the intricacies of the travellers' vouchers system, and what one could and could not do with these vouchers. It is 'our' system, and 'we' think that it works very well and fairly.

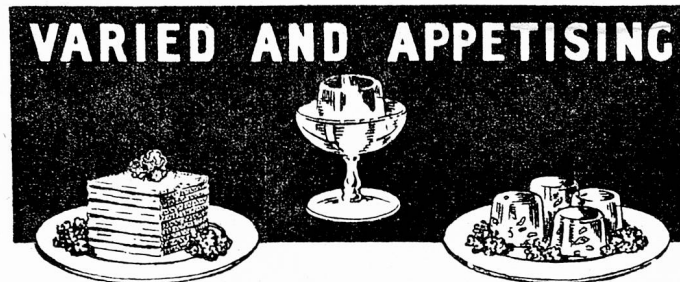
It is true that the goods in the shops are very expensive in Switzerland, and true again that the Swiss make their living by being born hosts. Some travellers have therefore concluded that they are courteous and kindly only because it pays them to be so, and that their real anxiety is always to make money. They are not indifferent to profit: why should they be? But there is a great weight of evidence for the selfless generosity of the Swiss. A badly sprained ankle needed many appointments with a Swiss masseur who gave to it some hours of expert manipulation and radiant heat. But he would accept no money — no, he would not, no matter how hard he was pressed.

"I will not take money from the English visitor. You saved us in 1940. You still pay a very heavy price for saving us. If we can do you a little service now, we do not take your money for it."

To insist further would have been ungracious. That is a tiny instance on a small scale. Much larger is the gesture of Swiss doctors who have raised among themselves the money necessary to give a three months' holiday in their own homes to the children of English doctors who were killed in the war. Still larger is the building of a children's village in the mountains near Trogen, where war orphans of every nationality may start their lives again. The children of each nation live there together in houses under the charge of teachers of their own nationality, and are educated in the language and the ways of their own country. When at last their physical and spiritual health has been built up again, and they have been trained to become what the Swiss consider to be good citizens, they go back to their own lands to play their part in the rebuilding of their national life.

The beauty of the Swiss landscape is, of course, incomparable and universally famous. The beauty of the Swiss national character is less well known, and the greatness of their political, social and cultural

achievement is but little realised. Yet the returning traveller finds himself reflecting more on these than on the mountains, and far more than on the amplitude of the food. He comes to the conclusion that it is due to the amazing degree of unity the Swiss enjoy; and looks a little sadly at his own country, with its endless and divisive political controversies which day by day grow steadily exacerbated. If the Swiss, who have three separate languages to contend with, can do it, why cannot we? Their experience shows that excessive governmental centralisation is the very way to destroy it. But governmental power in Britain grows more inexorably concentrated in a single centre every day. No doubt it is true that our problems and those of the Swiss are now very different, and that for us far more than for them the device of some form of the omniscient state is the condition of survival. But there is nothing in that conception of governmental authority which need be incompatible with the Swiss idea of a highly competent central government operating with flexible diversity through the different cantonal authorities. As a political conception it is much easier for us to work, for we have one language and the Swiss have three. National unity is the road to graciousness of living and of character, and this unity is a consequence of right politics, and politics tend to produce unity when the system of government they set up is first of all competent, but also flexible, various, and always anxious to delegate rather than to centralise authority.



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