

A ticinese portrait

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A TICINESE PORTRAIT

STANLEY MASON

When he was young, the lake was full of trout. He lived in a tall, proud house that still looks down on Locarno's spacious palm-lined *piazza*. Yet he was not meant for the town, and as the town grew, he shrank from it. Even as a boy he spent much of his time by the lake, fishing on the shore or helping the fishermen who went out to spread their nets; and the love of the water the spell of his own southern lake and the mountains it mirrored, already took hold of his heart.

In those days the *saleggi*, the sandbanks formed between Locarno and Ascona by the silt brought down by the wild River Maggia, were smaller and more sparsely overgrown. Today they reach out almost halfway across the lake, and from any of the surrounding hillsides the wanderer can observe their willow-grown frontiers and reconstruct the slow yet magnificent spectacle of the creation of a new landscape. On the sandy edges of the *saleggi* he wandered, a boy browned by the Ticinesan sun that was to shine on all his days. Yet there were times when he had to quit his native soil, and when he perhaps wondered if he would ever return. His mother died when he was thirteen, and they sent him away from home to serve an apprenticeship as a butcher in a North Italian town.

When he returned, it was to his own blessed and beloved corner of earth, from which he was never to move again. Since there was no work to be had in the trade he had learned, he went back to the love of his childhood and became a fisherman. The ring of green mountains around his lake, Tamaro und Paglione, Ghiridone and Vogorno, formed the setting in which he was happy to play out his part. Up in their fastnesses, when catches were poor in the lake, he spent whole days hunting the hare and the mountain pheasant.

As the times improved, there came a day when he was able to marry and to take over a small butcher's shop on the opposite side of the lake, under the shadow of Monte Gambarogno. There he raised a family and became the personality that gives him a right to this posthumous portrait.

Business was never very good in the small village of tumble-down stone houses clinging to the edge of the lake, accessible as yet only by water or by a small winding road running along the green wilderness of the shore. Those were the days when the women from Indemini used to come over the mountain pass to bring him their young goats. Before Easter they would come for the first time, when the heights of Sant'Anna still lay under the snow. No negotiable road at that time led to their wild little hamlet high in the Vedasca Valley. They had no choice but

to scale the pass by narrow footpaths, carrying on their backs the big *gerle*, tall wickerwork baskets widening towards the top, in which they carried two or even three live kids. On their feet they wore home-made cloth shoes; these they could not afford to spoil, and when they came to the snow they took them off and walked barefoot . . . The women of Indemini would come and sell him their goats and sit drinking coffee in his kitchen, speaking a quaint and lilting dialect.

The shop was never a great success. He was a just man and a kind-hearted man, not given to the art of amassing profit at the expense of the poor, and most of the villagers were poor. When his wife fell ill, and the bad debts accumulated, the day came when he had to give up his shop. He gave it up, and returned to the trade to which his heart belonged: he became a fisherman once more.

And so it happened that in the last two decades of his life he grew to be a familiar sight to the tourists who now began to populate his village in summer. Swiss and German, French and Dutch, all of them knew the fisherman who rowed past, a beret on his head, a pipe hanging from his mouth, his now deep-sunk eyes scanning the surface of the lake. They bought fish from him, knowing that what he sold was more than worth its price. They exchanged a few words with him. They came to know him, to value him, to see him as part of the lake and the landscape to which he so perfectly belonged.

Yet his seemingly tranquil days were not without their adventure. There were nights when storms would break, and the nets he had put out and marked by lamps would be swept by winds and currents towards the Italian frontier. He would be up in the middle of the night to watch the waters with his ancient binoculars, would be dragging on his rubber boots and rowing out into the howling darkness and the lashing waves.

There were quieter days, too, and I reckon it among my valued memories to have been out with him at four and five in the morning, when he drew in his nets and counted the living silver into a boat that crunched gently on the ripples. The lake at that hour was a fairy scene, full of deep and inward lucency, an illimitable shining calm on the edges of which arose, like the majestic shadows of some different and distant creation, mountains tipped with the faintest sprinkling of snow.

His days were not without their laughter, either. A born hunter, he could tell the tallest stories without the flicker of an eyelid. Even before I could understand his language I listened entranced to the skilled fabric of his

words and gestures. Strangers would stand fascinated by his tales, not daring to show their incredulity even when he got to the famous story of how he shot a pelican on the shore by Locarno. There was not a day's hunting in his history he could not recount with unhesitating accuracy and in the utmost detail. That trip to the Magadino end of the lake, seventeen years ago today? Ah yes, it had been a dry summer. And he had shot seventeen wild ducks with one salvo from the small cannon on his *spingarda*, and they had come back that night with twenty-three ducks and a wild goose. Towards his fellow-hunters and fellow-fishermen he was true to the age-old principle of never betraying the true proportions of your success and failures, and once when a particularly brazen crony wanted to see the three pheasants he had shot, he was forced to display the same pheasant at the window three times, each time turning it to present it at a different angle . . . It was a form of harmless deception he practised with mischievous gusto and with a wary twinkle in his eye.

The casual tourists and the other strangers who had settled on this mild and delightful shore would watch him pass in his boat, standing up to row as he always did, his pipe hanging from gums now almost devoid of teeth, his face burnt by the sun, his beret on his head, his deep-set eyes ranging over the waters he knew so well. They hailed him, they exchanged a joke with him, they asked him if he had any fish to sell. They watched him go, leaving ripples in the water, a genuine part of the eternal picture of this lake and its mountain setting. And the day came when they missed him. And the next day, and the next day too. Holiday-makers returning to the south at the time when the camellias and the mimosa bloom waited for the familiar figure in the boat, but waited in vain. Word went round among the visitors, and his wife was wearing black and often went, bowed and wordless, to the little cemetery above the lake road.

Life is an eternal exchange, even in a southern landscape that to so many means long days of leisure beside sunny waters. There are things that grow more frequent, like water-skiers tracing their white patterns across the water or the coloured lights of Locarno that are reflected over blue-black depths at dusk. But he was one of the other category: of the things that grow rarer, like the speckled trout and the kingfisher.

(By courtesy of "Switzerland"
Revue of S.N.T.O.)

THE SWISS CELEBRATE THEIR NATIONAL DAY

In many parts of Switzerland, there used to be bonfires at summer solstice time, either on 21st or (even more usual) on 24th June. In Central Switzerland, fires were lit also on St. Peter's and St. Paul's Day on 29th June. Since the end of the last century, all these fires are now lit on the National Day. This has another meaning, as well, for when the foreign overlords were rejected by the people of Switzerland in 1291, bonfires were lit as an expression of joy at having gained freedom.

Quite a number of celebrations were spoilt by inclement weather, and some of the speeches had to be dropped and the fireworks omitted. There were still picturesque processions in some of the towns, headed by mounted groups in historic costumes. A rather newer tradition is the *Jungbürgerfeier*, a ceremony during which the young men and women who have come of age at 20 are being

accepted as fully-fledged citizens. Some of these civic practices had a new significance, as quite a number of young Swiss women have now got the vote in local matters, so for instance in Chur.

The celebrations in Geneva and Lausanne were chaired by women this year, in Geneva by the Municipal President and in Lausanne by the President of the Municipal Council. At Bure, there were unpleasant incidents when separatists clashed with pro-Berne elements. In Basle, the time of the celebration was changed from afternoon to evening with the result that several times the usual numbers participated. The organisers kept to the venerable old *Münsterplatz*, and it was the bells of the Cathedral and the sounds of the traditional trombone ensemble from the St. George's tower, which opened the function. In Schaffhausen, usage has it that a wreath is deposited at the soldiers' memorial. In St. Gall, on account of rain, the remembrance service was held at the Municipal Theatre, and actors recited patriotic verse and prose by Schiller, C. F. Meyer and Gottfried Keller. At Schwanden, the celebration was combined with the 65th Cantonal Rifle Shooting Contest, and Federal Councillor Tschudi, whose *Heimatgemeinde* it is, gave the main address. At Altdorf, scenes from the Tell *Festspiele* were incorporated, and the whole Gotthard traffic was diverted so as not to interfere with the observance of the National Day. The celebration at Brunnen was televised. It was there that the two *Bundesriefe* of 1291 and 1315 were written according to historians.

Federal Councillor Celio spoke in Zurich, and his speech was criticised at a second meeting of an "anti-authoritative Committee". The President of the Confederation addressed the nation over radio and television. He appealed to the people to solve mounting contrasts solely with reason and without force. He said youth should be acknowledged as partner, but young people were mistaken if they thought they could use force in the name of freedom in a democratic State. He also felt that Switzerland could be much more humane, and in this the young would be able to participate.

Councillor of States Dr. F. Leu, Lucerne, said on the Ruetli that today's problems should be solved in the Ruetli spirit of 1291. 28 members of the Swiss Youth Parliament spent six weeks at the Pestalozzi Village at Trogen, trying to get to know various spheres and personalities. As an example: they had discussions with workers, staff and management of an industrial concern, and on 1st August, each of the participants spent the whole day sharing work and National Day Celebration on mountain farms in the district, so as to get to know their problems, too. The following week was divided between an R.C. centre at Morschach and a Protestant one on Boldern.

Federal Councillor Gnaegi received a group of young Americans who took a message of congratulation and good wishes from President Johnson and the American Nation to the Federal Palace; they were in Switzerland with the American Field Service. Federal Chancellor Buser received over 100 members of the Swiss Club of Freiburg (Breisgau), who visited Switzerland for the day. They had coffee at Langenbruck, lunch in Berne after visiting the Parliament Chambers, a meeting at Castle Oberhofen where the Director of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad addressed the party. Then followed a trip to Interlaken, Brienz, Bruenig, with tea in Lucerne before returning to Freiburg.

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