

Bears in Swiss valleys

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BEARS IN SWISS VALLEYS.

Protected in time, but only just in time, by Government restrictions on hunting, the chamois now seems sure of surviving in Switzerland. Its numbers are distinctly on the increase. The bears have gone, but less than seventy years ago there were a good many in the Engadine. One of the respected old families of the region, the Plantas, has bears' paws as its coat of arms. As late as the sixties three or four of the animals were being shot every year by Engadine hunters. Bruin was then, however, becoming steadily scarcer in the Rhaetian Alps. He regularly visited the valleys of Terzier Misocco, Ambra, Malleuches, Livrio, and Bregaglia, and other wild gorges and glens of that sparsely peopled region, where the wild cat hunted the marmot and the chamois fled the culture.

The peasants declared that the bears were of three sorts — a big black one, a big grey one, and a small brown one. The two former sorts were rare, they said. Albinoes were found occasionally. One shot by Jacob Fili was displayed in a little museum at Coire (Chur); there was another of the albinos in a private collection at Bevers. "Grandfather Blacktooth," as Bruin was called in the Engadine, was regarded as a mild, good-natured fellow, largely vegetarian in his diet. He ate berries, roots, herbs, and grass, like the American grizzly, and, like the grizzly, he occasionally developed a taste for sheep or goats. Then he became a nuisance. One culled fifteen sheep from the pastures of the Sutz-alp in the course of a few days. He even dallied with the notion of fresh beef, but the oxen were seen repulsing him in a co-operating group, heads outward, with menacing horns. Twenty-nine sheep were killed in 1858 on the Buffalora-alp by a bear. Seventeen were killed in about ten days at Zernetz.

"Grandfather Blacktooth" rarely attacked horses or cattle, and generally got the worst of it when he did. His strength was surprising. He would kill a horse, drag it down the bank of a mountain stream, among bushes and boulders, across, and up the other side. Having killed a cow, he would pull it out of its stable shed through the roof. His mode of attack was to launch himself at the neck of his victim, sink his teeth in its neck, and hang on until it dropped from loss of blood. He was by no means always bold in his attack on sheep and goats, said the peasants. He preferred to approach them in a fog. Sometimes he would seem deliberately to drive a small herd over a precipice, then make a detour to reach the bodies below; but this may well have been unpremeditated. He had been known to break in the door of a stable to get at the goats he smelt inside.

LONDON GOSSIP.

My Mail — of course, you are not interested — well, my mail of the week was: bills, and more bills, an invitation to visit a Nudist-Camp up on the Thames before closing down, or rather dressing-up, two tickets for a Whist-drive and an O.H. M.S. — being the income tax assessment or something. This dreary state of affairs in connection with the first London fog and the early darkness of the days definitely convinced me that it is going to be January! before long — and never mind, Santa Claus or Christmas.

In such days of "blues" it is only natural that man once more begins to think of the flight of time and the "transitoriness" of all things. It must have been in such a mood too, when it occurred to somebody that religion — not churches this time — needs "decoding," that the modern man may understand it, and "debunking," that he may respect it. — Religion must be drawn down again from the clouds, and be put to practical test and use here on earth.

Scientists, doctors, engineers, social reformers, religious seers, all, are making things new — or, at least they think they are — but selfishness, race hatred, narrow nationalism and greed have thrown all into chaos. Religion, of course, has always been challenged by the developing ideals of mankind, — but Christianity is being said to be paralyzed by the snobbery of Christians!

We should pray to be led back again from the unreal to the real, from exaggeration to balance. There is no GOD higher than the truth, no beauty without harmony. Maybe our economic and political problems are ethical and spiritual problems. —

All this, of course, is instinctively known to anybody, at one time or another; we talk about it in our dreams, but are forgetting again as soon as we smell bacon and eggs for breakfast.

And that reminds me that in 1937 the people of France will celebrate the invention of "soufflé" potatoes. One day ninety-six years ago King

A strong liking for honey and fruit often led him to his doom. In quest of grapes he used to make long treks from the uplands of the Engadine to the vineyards of the Pays de Vaud and the Valais, where they shot him and hung up his paws in the chalets as trophies. He liked ants, the large wood ants; their acid appealed to his palate as does pickle acid to ours. He used to be seen "tucking into" a nest of ants with gusto, licking them up by the hundred with his long tongue.

Sometimes he felt like a day's fishing. He used to be seen sitting patiently by the brink of a stream, awaiting the arrival of unwary trout, which he whacked out of the water with much the same motion as we show in hitting a boundary with a cricket bat.

There was not a single story in the Engadine of his attacking a human being without provocation. One day he met a little girl who was gathering wild strawberries. Her basket was on the grass near by. She was too terrified to run away, but she admitted that "Grandfather Blacktooth" gave her no cause to. He looked at the strawberries, helped himself to some, but not all of them, and then departed.

Bruin was hunted in the winter-time, when his tracks were easy to trace in the snow. He used to emerge sleepily from his hibernation, during mild spells of weather, take a prow, and return drowsily to his den. The peasants said that in February he cast the skin on the soles of his feet, and hence could not run fast. (I do not think that is the case). The Engadine bear took life easily, yet got through quite a lot of work. Imbued with no ideal of hustle for hustle's sake, he took his time about his traffics and discoveries. If he had to hurry he could get along surprisingly fast. Mild as he was when treated with good manners, he was as full of fight as anyone at Donnybrook Fair if assaulted — or even fired at and missed. The peasants used to go after him in pairs and preferred to take their first shot at him from behind, dropping into cover immediately after pulling the trigger.

Coming to close quarters with a hunter, Bruin used to rise on his hind legs. Certain Grison hunters used to make a vaunt of closing with him, as if wrestling, throwing one arm round his neck and plunging the other, protected by a steel gauntlet, down his throat, stabbing him from inside. The old men of some of the families with a bear-hunting tradition will still tell you disquieting bedtime stories about those desperate grapples. They may be sought in the Valley of Buotsch, for instance. Jacob Fili, of Zernetz, killed more than a dozen bears, some with his gun from a distance, two or three in hand-to-hand combat. Big brutes, some of those Engadine bears, weighing as much as five hundred pounds.

M. G.

Louis Philippe was late for his dinner. His fried potatoes got cold. His cook put them back in the hot fat. They puffed up like balloons. They were "soufflé" — and all by accident! This happened at St. Germain-en-Laye, I read, where the natives are still so proud of it that they are taking four years to plan their potato celebration. Incidentally, 1837 I understand, was also the year they had their first railroad — but what is a railroad to a Frenchman as long as he has fried potatoes!

I personally prefer ships to railroads, and no other place is more interesting to me than a "harbour." Have you ever been down at the London Docks at night when the ships come in, especially tramps and tankers? for they land hefty sailors tired of food from flooded kitchens, and the isolation of the sea. They want to drink and carouse. Willing arms are always waiting, too. And those ladies of the docks looked rather large to me, some were aproned and matronly. They do not coquette. Instead they grab a pair of seamen — sailors invariably leave a ship in pairs — and march them away, usually without protest.

I saw a boyish Scandinavian sailor in his work suit of blue denim, probably a cabin boy, hesitate at the end of a gangplank. It appeared to be his first visit and he was gloriously young. But his eyes were the bleak blue of heroes who once looked over the prow of a Viking galley. His cap with a red ribbon sat abaft his tousled of tow-coloured hair. He took a few hesitant steps forward, poised awhile, then returned, plunged hands in pockets and went up the chute whistling. — I like to think he decided to spend an evening reading one of the first writings of Oswald Spengler — of Nihilism, practically interpreted as to meet what he saw from the gangplank!

And cats are also down at the docks. They come out around 1 a.m. when the streets, docks and produce houses are almost deserted. Till dawn they own the district. Eyes glitter everywhere. I counted 60 and stopped counting. Now and then the shrill howl of a fierce love, or an equally fierce hate, tears the silence like a knife.

CITY SWISS CLUB.

October 3rd, 1933.

After an absence of several months it is a great pleasure to find oneself back in the City Swiss Club.

I found myself seated between one of the most important business men of the Colony and an eminent banker; and I inveigled them into a discussion on political economy and the mystery of the exchanges.

To my great sorrow I must confess that at the end of the dinner I was just as enlightened as at the beginning, but whether this was due to my innate stupidity or to some other reason, I do not know. There were present some thirty members and the chair was taken by Mr. Billeter, in the absence of the President.

I believe that this was Mr. Billeter's debut in the presidential chair, but from the way in which he performed his duties, I do not think that it could really be the first time.

However, his task was not very difficult as there was very little business, and the only thing of importance which I have to report is that the Annual Banquet will be held on Friday, November 24th at the Grosvenor Hotel. *ek.*

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I saw one big battling ginger, gashed and bleeding, running into things as though blinded.

There are those who will argue that a dog is just a low cur, but a cat has all the blood and habits of royalty plus the fine, sneering superciliousness that should accompany such blood. To me the cat is Jekyll and Hyde. By day he endures men and women with a four-flush of affection. But at night, completely savage, the cat becomes an unemotional, cold killer. With the first glow of morning he returns the perfect, little gentleman, tripping purringly toward his milk, almost smiling. Yet, after all, headlines reveal humans are like that. And furthermore I want to emphasize that I only talked about "male" cats — to the ladies!

And while we are now on such "nightly" subjects — I have wondered if other wanderers at night in the city's streets are drawn to hesitate before lit windows where there's music. Last night before an old brownstone, not far off Baker Street, I halted. A silhouette of a woman's hands moved over the keys of a piano softly, caressingly, flirting in a leisurely way with a bar of Grieg, wandering into chords toward a snatch of Schumann. Whoever it was seemed to be choosing a melody. I wondered if it would be Mozart at last or some — good night, sweetheart. All of a sudden there floated out of the darkness a woman's voice — velvety, warm and light, and the song she sang began: "Grieve not, dear love! although we often part." I might lie and say my eyes misted. But I did go on with a queer clutch in my throat. For something about the voice was pathetically poignant, a heart that was overflowing with overwhelming ache.

And so I woke up the other morning with a real London cold — ashamed to look out into a velvety Autumn sunshine. — Also I made a sucker out of the proverb: "He that riseth late shall trot all day." I got up at 11 o'clock and have been sneezing over this "gossip" until right now. And it is dusk. — But never mind, I had still a one-day-holiday coming to me.

Mops.