

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

Once upon a time, high upon a Swiss mountain, there lived a family of Swiss farmers named Obenamberg. Father Obenamberg, called "Seppli" by the villagers, was a hard-working, clean-living man of sixty-two, who got up every morning at half-past three to attend to the many chores of his farm, which was perched lazily on the steep slopes of an alp.

It was a rich alp, abundant with flowers in the spring, with fine, nourishing grass for the cows. Farmer Obenamberg's cows were healthy and gave pure, creamy milk, like milk should be in Switzerland. Seppli's family consisted of two children, Heidi and Gottfried, and a wife, one of the most prominent suffragettes of Eastern Switzerland. Heidi was a charming child when she was very young—just like the fabled Heidi of the book. Gottfried, at the age of seven, looked like William Tell, except for the beard, which Gottfried didn't grow until he was nearly fifteen.

Gottfried loved the farm life above the village of Strampelhosen, where his family had lived for generations. From the very beginning, he loved to help around the house and the farm. He would often lead his father's cows high up on the lush alp, where the grass was always greener and the resulting milk still milkier. As he grew older, Gottfried learned to perform the more difficult tasks—like collecting manure and placing it on a pile in front of the house. Seppli and Gottfried were proud of their manure pile, the largest and most pungent within twenty-seven kilometers. Seppli knew that some of his countrymen were renowned for the size of their numbered bank accounts, but for Seppli wealth was a manure pile, and Gottfried was the bookkeeper.

It was a placid existence, this Alpine life. There were no neuroses, no anxiety, on Gottfried's alp, just flowers and sunshine and some indolent horseflies who buzzed around the big manure pile on brilliant summer days.

One afternoon, not long after his seventeenth birthday, Gottfried made his way down into Strampelhosen to buy some *kräuter* schnaps for Father Seppli. There, in front of the local Gasthaus, he noticed a great commotion. As he approached, he heard the mayor announce to the villagers that a group of Zurich businessmen had decided to finance a new ski resort in and around the sleepy town. Gottfried's jaw dropped open, and he lost the cigar he was smoking. "Ski resort", he murmured to himself. "Finally something's happening around this dull hayseed of a town!"

Gottfried was beside himself. He could hardly believe the news and rushed back up the alp to tell his father, completely forgetting the *kräuter* schnaps. Along the way, he dreamt of the day when Strampelhosen would be as famous as Davos and Zermatt and Herrliberg. He imagined himself as Strampelhosen's foremost ski teacher, wearing a brownish-red jacket with an emblem on it.

Gottfried began to study hard in his free time, for if he wanted to be a ski instructor, with pupils from all over the world, he would have to learn many things. First, he would have to learn to ski and to do the Wiggle and the Waggle and the downhill Columбина, and all the other ornate turns and stops he had seen on Swiss television.

And he would have to learn to speak English and French and German. By the time the new resort had been established, Gottfried had, in fact, become Strampelhosen's authentic expert, thanks largely to the many books on skiing and mountaineering he ordered from a publishing company in London. Now, as the late autumn days grew shorter and the sun dimmed behind the Hornhorn mountain, Gottfried had only to wait for the first good snow.

When the snow came, Gottfried couldn't wait to rip off his tattered overalls and put on the stretch pants and the brownish-red jacket with the emblem on it. A pair of goggles he had ordered from Dortmund and a gay, tassled hat completed the picture: Gottfried was now Freddy, popular ski instructor of the Strampelhosen Ski School. His first class that first morning was made up of Americans who had flown over on one of the package tours organized by Trans Liechtenstein Airlines.

Freddy was the hit of the season, both as a glamorous skier and as a dashing socialite after sundown. He soon knew all the princes and sheiks by their first names and was the toast of the *après-ski* set. He was deeply tanned and athletic-looking, and had begun to smoke a pipe. There were incessant demands for private lessons with Freddy, especially from American college girls, who thought he was as handsome a ski instructor as Switzerland had ever produced. He even had an offer from a film company, which, good Swiss that he was, he refused when he learned they wanted him to advertise Japanese-made safety bindings. His book, *How to Ski Like Me*, was an international sensation, and had already gone into its sixth printing.

Freddy could dance the twist, the frug and the letkiss until dawn in the rustic village Gasthaus, now known as the "Snow Star Chalet & Grill Room". He was in his element singing "I Been Workin' on the Railroad" and "Trink, trink, Brüderlein, trink"—an international life if ever one had existed.

And in the morning, Freddy was always as fresh as edelweiss, as though the evening before were but a dream. One day, as he led his class *schussing* down the alp past his father's farm, he noticed little buds of early crocuses pushing their delicate colors up through the thinning blanket of snow. There was an unmistakable sparkle of spring in the air, and soon rivulets began to appear where only streams of ice had been before.

The first—and eminently successful—winter sports season at Strampelhosen was drawing to a close. Soon the last tourist had packed and sent off his skis and the new hotels were preparing to close up until later in the year.

Gottfried put his tattered overalls back on and walked solemnly into the old barn. His pitchfork was still there, leaning against the wall, where he had left it in November. He grabbed the fork with both hands and dug into an imaginary pile of manure near the stable, and threw what would have been a mighty load in the direction of a haywagon which wasn't there. With his right foot he indignantly kicked a battered tin can out through the barn door and into the spring sunshine.

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