

Paths of glory : Gstaad, Switzerland

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PATHS OF GLORY

GSTAAD, SWITZERLAND

THIS IS an incredibly picturesque village of about 3000 people, some 3000 feet above sea level. "It's the lowest place in the world for really first-rate skiing," an expert on the subject told me. He was referring to the altitude, not the morals. The morals are no lower than those in any other favored playground of those favored few called the Jet Set—and there truly is such a group (or Le Group, as they refer to themselves). At lunch one day I found myself seated next to a ravishing blonde who is the girl friend of an Italian Prince. She was looking dejected. "Why so sad?" I asked. She sighed a golden, perfumed sigh. "I was going to Acapulco this morning," she said, "but I overslept."

GSTAAD: the millionaires drive Volkswagens and the taxis are Mercedes-Benzes. Each VW has two sets of skis strapped to the back (are they built in at the factory—or when you buy a pair of skis, do they throw in a VW?). On the road one day, we saw a Volkswagen with a single ski on the left and a pair on the right. "Look!" whooped Stanley Weiss. "Trader Vic and his wife must be here." There are so many rich Greeks on hand—skiing wildly, gambling madly—that Le Group calls this Gstaadopolis. And there are more celebrities per square foot than any place this side of Gstaad's bitter rival, St. Moritz (a celebrity, as Daniel Boorstin puts it, is somebody who is well-known for being well-known). It was a bad day for the Gstaadlings when that well-known celebrity, the Karim Aga Khan, transferred his affections to St. Moritz because he was not allowed to land his plane here among the dangerous peaks that encircle Gstaad.

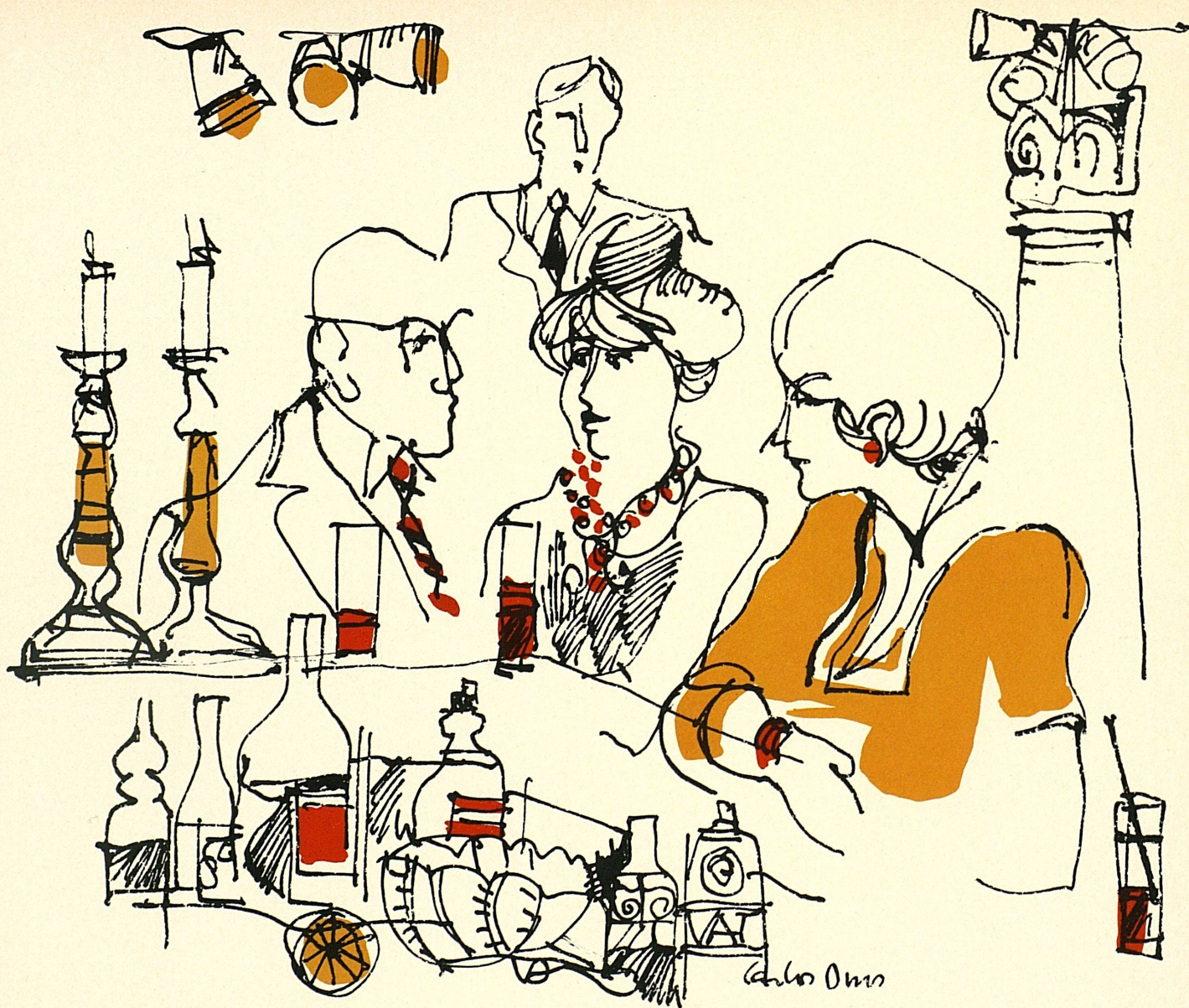
THERE ARE three hangouts for Le Group. The folksiest is an old hotel on the main street, appropriately called the Olden, where a lady named Molly makes the best Bull Shots in the world: real soup stock, Polish vodka, juice of half a lemon, celery salt and tabasco, hand-shaken with three ("only three!") cubes of ice, and served with a float of 110-proof Russian vodka. The second headquarters is the Palace Hotel, a glorious neo-Camelot of turrets

and banners, lording it over the village from a hilltop. Here there is a wise old barman named André, who, like the sainted George of the Paris Ritz, seems to know everybody; he is a type to be found only in old European hotels. Here there are waiters in batwing collars, tea in the vast lobby (while a smiling pianist plays Viennese waltzes) and, in the various corners, those crazy Greeks gambling thousands on gin rummy and backgammon. You can wander into the Palace Grill as late or early as 4 a.m. and find a crowd dancing and drinking—and you still think San Francisco swings?

THE THIRD rallying point is as close to heaven as mortal man may aspire to—a gray stone aerie atop a 3000-ft. peak, reachable only by a two-stage lift and called, rather unimaginatively, the Eagle Club. This is where the celebrities gather for lunch and to celebrate their well-knownness. The food and the view are of an equal magnificence, and those who have been turned down for membership have been known to dash themselves to death on the rocks below, with no one to mourn their passing.

Come, peasants, let us look at the beautiful people! There is the Chief Eagle, the Earl of Warwick, a man with fierce eyebrows and a Churchillian manner; he is glowering at me and saying silently: "How did he get in?" In that secluded corner sit Prince Rainier and Princess Grace, she looking a bit long in the tooth, he a bit thick in the middle. Here is David Niven, all smiling charm: "You should have been in San Francisco last night, old boy—they sneaked 'Casino Royale'" (the report from home: it's a disappointment). There is William Buckley and it is reassuring to find that he looks as though he had just smelled something bad even when seated alone.

The man with the cruel face is Herr Thyssen, probably the richest man in Germany now that the Krupps are getting their come-Kruppance. He is with a blonde Brazilian butterball, entirely fetching. His ex-wife, Fiona, is there, too, with her man of the moment, life in Gstaad being momentous in that fashion. Porfirio Rubirosa's widow, Odile (known as "Big deal"



to the irreverent Americans), is holding hands with Count Poniatowski of Paris, another big deal. For the moment. The pleasant man who looks like John Kenneth Galbraith is indeed J. K. G. The tall blonde young man who looks vaguely German is actually Italian: Prince Victor Emmanuel, son of King Umberto, and the Americans call him "Old Vic." He is with his sister, Princess Maria Gabriella of Savoie, and how is out-of-season royalty faring these days?

Not too badly, although Old Vic has to work during the week at a bank in Lugano, almost within sight of the Italy he has been banished from forever. He prefers that to living with his family in Portugal, land of the dead dynasties. For weekend kicks, he roars around Gstaad in a blue Jeep late at night, firing his pellet gun at various objects. The Swiss are

most permissive about deposed royalty, as long as the bills are paid ("In Switzerland," somebody once ob-

served, "the customer is king, and the king is only a customer"—a neat arrangement).

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

GSTAAD, SWITZERLAND

HERE I AM, in the Pearl of the Bernese Alps, and I can't even pronounce the name of the place. The "g" is more or less silent, as in "gnu", or even "nu?" It's a one-syllable word with the accent on the second syllable: you tie yourself into a knot and spit it out, zo—"gSHTAAD." However you call it, it's one of the premier ski resorts of the world, and, in my creaky condition, I wouldn't ride a pair of skis if they had training wheels. This being the case, you might think I feel as out of place as an astronaut on a cable car, but here you are

wrong. There is more to Gstaad than idiots sliding down slopes on sticks. It is also a people-watchers' paradise, a name-droppers' Nirvana, and a well-beaten capital of the well-beaten jet set. Look, ma, I'm in the jet set! You can tell by the Swissair labels on my bags, including the ones under my eyes.

EVERY AIRLINE has its gimmick these days, even safe, sane, sober Swissair. In fact, it has two gimmicks.