

A Tschiffely book

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A FEW WORDS ABOUT WINTER HOLIDAY ORGANISATION AND SERVICE TO THE VISITOR IN THE GRISONS.

By H. V. BERLEPSCH-VALENDAS.

Many of us are inclined to take quite a number of really remarkable things for granted; it seldom occurs to us to pause for a moment and ask ourselves how they are possible at all. We see, for instance, a few thousand people on the Parsem snowfields at the same time — 8,500 feet above sea-level, with an altitude difference of over 6,000 feet between the start and the finish of the downrun; or a multitude of people meeting on the Morteratsch Glacier; or the finest horses in the world on the Lake at St. Moritz — oh, and a host of similar things!

"Perfectly obvious!" is the cynic's comment. "Firstly there are railways in the Grisons and motoring roads kept free of snow; secondly the district has scores of hotels; thirdly mountain railways and ski-hoists make all the skiing grounds accessible; fourthly there are people ready to pay for a good horse-box and others willing to provide it and every other amenity that money can buy and the guest can pay for."

This method of deduction is of course obvious, but the whole truth goes much farther than that. Let us consider for a moment the social and cultural background of the Grisons, its proverbial hospitality. And let us suppose that you have convinced yourself of the advantages of a winter stay there, acknowledged its claims as a holiday resort where there is bound to be plenty of snow and sunshine. You repair to your Travel Agents to make the necessary arrangements. — And at once you find yourself taking things for granted again: your hotel accommodation is reserved according to your requirements, tickets are made out and handed to you, together with anything else in the way of documents and literature you may need. You are conveyed by special train to Coire, thence by the Rhaetian Railway or motor bus to one of the 150 valleys of your happy hunting grounds. There may be several hundred others travelling with you, all of them armed with skis, but you will never have to complain of a dearth of seats or travelling comfort. You arrive without hitch or incident at your chosen hotel, and here again you find everything prepared for your visit, with comfort as the keynote.

It all appears to be very simple, but a moment's thought will show that behind it there must be an extremely efficient organisation. It has been functioning weeks and even months before you set off on your journey; wires have been humming between your Travel Agents in London, Paris, Berlin, Zurich, Geneva, or wherever it is, and your hotel in St. Moritz, Parpan, Arosa, Samnaun, Davos, not to mention the traffic office of the Rhaetian Railway in Coire and the numerous other travel services and organisations called into action by your journey. Those telegrams have arranged for you — and a hundred thousand or so other travellers — the time-tables and special trains, sleeping-cars and dining-cars, even to the motor car that puts you down at your hotel door. All these various factors and accessories have been combined to form a synchronised machine whose main purpose is to convey you efficiently and smoothly to and from chosen resort. Truly, it is good "staff work," and is also comparable with military operations in that it is all built up on improvisation. On Sundays, for instance, and particularly in fine weather, there is a general invasion: from a radius of 200 miles a huge army of visitors pour into the Grisons from all points of the compass, while at certain periods, such as Christmas and the New Year, there are additional tidal waves of traffic. Only by very minute preparation and organisation of all railway departments, auxiliary time-tables, rolling-stock and staff can congestion and confusion be avoided at such times.

Meanwhile a mass of inside work has to be done to make all this possible. As soon as the last summer visitors have departed, with pleasure resorts are given over to the carpenters, fitters, architects, masons, roadmakers, engineers, prospectors and poster printers, typists, hotel managers and "Kurdirektors." Everybody is working at high pressure, for by the time the first winter visitor is due everything must be polished and shining like a new pin ready to receive him. And when he does come, there is still a part of this great white world which he sees and takes for granted — a part entrusted to railway officials, chefs, hotel porters, chamber-maids, waiters, musicians, skiing and skating instructors, professional dancers, snow-sweepers, ice experts and all those others who contribute their notes to this symphony of work and organisation. Here we really see a masterpiece that could only be achieved after generations of experience. What is to-day a fine art had its first beginnings in olden times, in the days of the first caravans that crossed the passes of the Grisons.

But there is also another and very important element. For the visitor to the Grisons never feels that he is at the mercy of a soulless machine working in the service of the foreign tourist industry. This is largely due to the "humanising" nature of winter-sport itself, which fuses everything and everybody touching it — visitors and residents, young and old, rich and poor, into a single community. And this in turn provides the "atmosphere" for the host of institutions and events that attract people from all over the world to the mountains of the Grisons. But all these things have to be prepared and organised; only a people born and bred in the heart of a winter-sports country knows what is necessary for the creation and care of a perfect ski-leap or bob-run or ice-rink, knows how much pleasure can be derived from a really first-class skiing track, the peculiarities of Alpine winter in its good and bad moods; they too feel how the blood courses through their veins during an exciting ski-race, for skiing means as much to them, and more, as to the most enthusiastic visitor. It is on experience and common-sense and personal interest that the excellent arrangements we find in the Grisons are made and improved year by year.

Each innovation seems to come of itself as the need for it becomes apparent — new skiing approaches right into the village of Arosa, doubled capacity for the Parsem run at Davos, a ski-hoist to the Strela Pass or at Pontresina, two new means of conveyance on the slopes of Piz Nair, near St. Moritz — to mention but a few. It is on the same foundation that the skill of the ski-school instructors has been brought to a fine art, the merry round of winter fêtes and festivals arranged, elaborated, infused with life and jollity, whatever the cost.

It is ineffably delightful to plunge into this new element — this world of clear air and sunshine and cultured hospitality. Try it. — You will then perhaps return home with a certain amount of respect in your heart for this little people whose mission in life has been to increase the pleasure of this world.

A TSCHIFFELY BOOK.

"Don Roberto (R. B. Cunninghame Graham)"

by A. F. Tschiffely.

(Heinemann 15s. net.)

By A. G. MACDONELL (*The Observer*).

It is always a happy circumstance when a hero chooses his own biographer. Far too often in these days of cut-throat competition in the literary world has there been an undignified scramble to produce the first portrait of a man or woman who has achieved fame. The case of Mr. Cunninghame Graham is particularly fortunate, for he had nominated Mr. Tschiffely as his biographer several years before he died, and so the famous Swiss horseman was able to get a flying start on his work of piety.

The two men, the Scot and the Swiss had the two common links — a passion for adventure and an overwhelming love for the wide open spaces of South America. And these common interests have enabled Mr. Tschiffely to write a supremely sympathetic account of the great hidalga.

Cunninghame Graham came of an old Scottish family in the south of Scotland. But one of his grandmothers was a beautiful Spanish girl, and from her he inherited the Latin excitement of mind which never deserted him during the eighty-three years of his life. From his earliest days he visited his grand-mother in Spain and became bi-lingual in English and Spanish, and acquired the nickname of Don Roberto, by which he was universally known for the rest of his life.

Mr. Tschiffely describes, with the knowledge of first-hand experience, Don Roberto's early experiences in Texas, Argentina, and Uruguay. He rode, and he raced, and he fought, and he went through revolutions, and he ranched, and he explored. It was just after the extraordinary tragedy of the war between Paraguay and most of the rest of South America, and the land was in such a miserable and chaotic state, that Don Roberto was sure that it was a paradise for a bold adventurer. So it was, as far as adventure was concerned. As far as finance was concerned there was very little reward for toil, and Don Roberto was often in serious straits. But the young Scottish laird was too proud to ask for help from home, and he turned unflinchingly from one occupation to another, paying as little attention to disaster as to success. When he returned to England in 1883 on hearing that his father was seriously ill, he left South America without a single penny of the money which he had brought out with him.

Don Roberto, on settling in Scotland, threw himself into politics with the same enthusiasm with which he had galloped and fought. He very soon became a firebrand on the Left Wing.

His experiences in foreign lands had led him far from the conventional traditions of his ancestors, to the dismay of his friends, he proclaimed himself a Radical, though occasionally he made sympathetic allusions to some dogma of the Tory faith. Being a thorough-going democrat, he even shocked Radicals when he spoke about universal suffrage, abolition of the House of Lords, free secular education with a free meal, triennial Parliaments, graduated income tax, nationalisation of land, Sunday opening of museums, abolition of mineral royalties, disestablishment and direct veto of the liquor traffic, eight-hour working day, etc.

He was a virile speaker, perhaps at his happiest when the meetings were stormy and the opposition was in a bad temper. His retorts to hecklers were often savage, and it became very obvious that the new champion of the poor was not a man who suffered fools patiently. When he was elected to Parliament "to plead vehemently for the causes nearest to his heart" he put a good deal more emphasis on the vehemence than upon the pleading. He poured sarcasm, irony, satire, invective, and often violent rudeness upon those whom he disliked, and the aristocratic, bearded, red-haired adventurer who rode his mustang into the Palace Yard, and who was afraid of no one, became one of the most celebrated members of the House.

* * *

But it was in 1887 that Don Roberto set the seal upon his reputation as a man of fire, when he and John Burns were arrested in the great battle of Trafalgar Square. Mr. Tschiffely makes, I think, too little of the case as it was fought at the Old Bailey, with two Members of Parliament in the dock. He could, with advantage, have devoted more space to Don Roberto's defence as conducted by Mr. Asquith, but he quotes the passionate speech which Don Roberto made in the House on completing the term of six weeks' imprisonment to which he was sentenced. In this speech he said:—

It has been charged against me that I have stirred up a lot of ignorant men to dash their heads against a wall, and it has been charged against me that I have spoken sedition and I am a revolutionary. If to be a revolutionary is to wish to ameliorate the condition of the poor, to wish for a more democratic form of government, to wish that Members of Parliament should be paid for their services, to wish to pass Liberal measures of a similar nature, then I am a revolutionary.

And, in a sense, Don Roberto really was a revolutionary, but, fundamentally, he was a Tory or Tories.

* * *

Probably nothing was so characteristic in his life as the exquisite courtesy of his manners, and that was the hallmark of a man who had a vast pride in all the things which make life beautiful. To Don Roberto a horse, and a silver-mounted saddle, and the sun setting over the Argentinian plains, and integrity of mind, and chivalry, and the art of writing beautiful English, and his ancient Scottish heredity, were all simply different facets of the same jewel. He was fundamentally a Tory because he believed in the beauty of the world as he found it. He would have changed, had he been able, the conditions in which the poor live. But he would never have changed, had he been able, the essential world into which he was born.

* * *

Mr. Tschiffely has re-created the picture of the great hidalga. It is rumoured that Mr. Tschiffely is about to embark upon one of his epic rides. The world will be enriched by high adventure, but it may also lose a piece of literature. For this quiet, modest, Swiss schoolmaster can handle the pen as skilfully as he can a mustang of the pampas.

PERSONAL.

We extend our sincere sympathy to Mr. and Mrs. Ch. Barbezat, of 57, Southway, Carshalton, Surrey, Mr. Barbezat's father having died in Switzerland at the age of 91.

We extend hearty congratulations to Mr. F. Kienast, of 20, Orchard Avenue, Holly Park, Church End, Finchley, on the occasion of his 70th birthday anniversary.

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