

# Land of plenty

Autor(en): **Postbridge, Warren**

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## LAND OF PLENTY.

By WARREN POSTBRIDGE.

(This article is re-printed with due acknowledgment from the "SPECTATOR," August 8th, 1947..)

One risk any intending visitor to Switzerland must be prepared to face—of dying of a surfeit in his first week. To be seated, an hour after leaving the aeroplane, before a steak representing much more than a week's meat ration at home, to be served with two meat meals daily and invariably offered a second helping—all this is an experience to which the Englishman's war-time and post-war digestive system is ill attuned. But custom can blunt pleasure as well as sorrow, and what ought to seem excessive (as in fact it is) soon assumes the dimensions of the merely adequate. Meals are a material theme to dwell on, but they serve as symbol of the general lavishness which, next to its mountains and lakes, is Switzerland's salient characteristic to the Englishman, and most other Europeans, to-day. Shops and markets are full of fruit and vegetables, apples and pears, plums and apricots and nectarines and peaches and cherries and bananas (as many of these last as you want) mostly at prices well below what they would cost if you could get them in England.

For that matter all the shops are full of everything. Shabby Englishmen, straining the currency restrictions to renew their wardrobes without coupons — I have just seen walking the streets of Thun a pair of unmistakable Swiss shoes that will soon be evoking astonishment and admiration in the Banbury road — and some of them debating whether to invest in shirts that would perplex Piccadilly or risk finding themselves before the coupon-period ends with no shirts at all. Most of these things cost rather more at the current rate of exchange (about 17.35 to the £) than in London, but ladies' underwear, I learn on good and entirely suitable authority, is much cheaper, particularly — but what need, after all, to particularise? As for the *confiseries* and chocolate-shops they are beyond anything the Englishman of to-day can imagine; the local demand must be enormous, for every third or fourth shop seems to offer such wares. Shops full of cheeses flank shops full of cutlery and others full of leather-ware. It is all part of the general lavishness; even the lavatory-cisterns do their work with a vigour and a volume that would horrify the Metropolitan Water Board. Electric lights blaze all night. Only coal is short and dear.

But of course there is far more than that to Switzerland, and the common things here strike the traveller returning after seven or eight years with a new freshness. Never, even before the war, do I remember Switzerland as quite the garden it is to-day. The number of millions of geraniums alone is beyond computation. It must run easily into scores, for not the humblest wooden chalet is without its adornment of scarlet and green along every window-sill. Trees here are not planted so much by rivers of water as by pools of water, pools some of them several miles long. Never, I should imagine, did any country know how to make so much of water and greenery. You look across the brilliance of flowers and the green of mown grass to the brilliant blue of the lake, with more emerald grass beyond, and above that the deeper green of the pines, and capping all the eternal snows. That is

Switzerland, and the first week of it leaves the Englishman dazzled and bewildered.

And yet there is more still to it than that. Sensuous satisfaction is well enough, and we are entitled to a little of it in all conscience. But it is in other spheres that the contrast between this country and our own becomes disturbing. With the air of prosperity goes an unmistakable air of tranquility. It is only when the sight of so many quiet untroubled faces in the streets strikes you that you realise how much of that is absent in the streets of English towns. The children are the healthiest I remember seeing anywhere, and the liveliest and the happiest, and a glance at the young men and girls of twenty shows how little the promise of childhood has failed. They work hard and they work well, and they know how to make the most of their pleasures — swimming or rowing or cycling (the cycles in Switzerland seem to be little fewer than the geraniums), climbing, making music or listening to it, or simply sitting and eating ices or sipping coffee or light beer and talking to their friends at the crowded tables packed close outside cafés great and small.

Cleanliness, in the trains, in the trams, in the hotels, in every public building, is as conspicuous as it ever was. The spotless third-class carriages with their varnished slatted seats are cooler as well as cheaper than the second or first, and the visitor, unless he suffers from undue pomposity, soon decides which it is wise to choose. You get your lunch on the train, and with great respect to the L.N.E.R. and L.M.S. you draw inevitable comparisons in regard to food, service and comfort. However, the cost is equivalent to a

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little more than 5s.; meals are not cheap in Switzerland. Nor are many other things, perhaps most things.

What a country to return to, you tend to say, as you stand in some small Swiss town on a bridge over a blue rushing river, with old red gables overhanging it here and flower-clad slopes lining it there and the white mountains piercing the heavens somewhere in the distance. Yes, no doubt, in some ways. But it is not always summer in Switzerland, and not nothing but sunshine when it is summer. And there are higher destinies in life than to retire to a perennial garden. The garden here, the garden of Switzerland, is thoroughly right in itself. The men and women who have made the garden have worked hard to make it and work hard to-day to keep it what it is; their lives are far fuller and richer for being lived in the midst of what they have created. We have not the same right to enter into their labours.

A well-run, or well-ordered, country. A country where the little courtesies that do so much to smooth life are observed. You can go to a shop, ask for something that they haven't quite got, spend ten minutes turning over this garment and that, and be sped on your way, as you depart empty-handed, with a pleasant and perfectly sincere "*à votre service.*" We, of course, are tired; our nerves are over-strained. This people is neither tired nor strained. It has suffered directly from neither of the wars, and seeing what the country is and how it lives one can understand the passionate determination of the Swiss that nothing, not even membership of the United Nations, shall be

allowed to embroil it in the quarrels of greater neighbours. Meanwhile it can at least give rest and, in the literal sense re-creation, to tens of thousands of English men and women (not even Switzerland, it must be recognised, could lure Scotsmen from Scotland) this summer.

After their three or four weeks, or what it may be, they will turn regretful steps homeward, pondering on one conclusion forced inevitably upon them. In England we are living as circumstances compel us to live; here in Switzerland men and women are living as men and women ought to live. This is the right and normal life — not, of course, merely materially. What we have been missing these last years most of us have not quite realised till we were able once more to get away and look at England from outside. The vantage point, no doubt, is almost unique. There can hardly be another country in Europe where contentment is as widely spread as in Switzerland. It does not alter the fact that the unique is no more than what the normal ought to be, and our unending task must be to bridge the gulf. The secret of the means must be discovered somehow. Of course the differences between Switzerland and England are too fundamental and too numerous for any comparison to yield far-reaching results. It can only yield suggestions and stimulus. The Englishman in Switzerland cannot quite dispel the reflection that he will be returning in a week or two from sunshine to sombreness, figuratively as well as literally. But he can at least resolve that what he has gained in Switzerland shall be turned as far as may be to turning sombreness in England into sunshine.

