

Flowers in Switzerland

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FLOWERS IN SWITZERLAND

Walks and Climbs Around Zermatt

by SETON GORDON.

Reproduced from the July issue of "THE SCOTSMAN" by courtesy of the EDITOR.

The mountain railway from Zermatt to the Gornergrat is of great benefit to mountaineers and walkers, besides the tourists who use it for the remarkable views it gives. One day my wife and I left the train at Roten Boden, the station before Gornergrat, and, passing above the small, clear lake of Riffelsee, where many trout were rising 9200 feet above sea level, crossed the Gorner and Theodul glaciers to the Gandegg mountain hut. It was a day of sun and shade, and on the giant hills, Monte Rosa, Breithorn, and Matterhorn, fleecy clouds were resting. The scene, as we walked mile after mile across the glaciers, reminded me of the country of Spitsbergen, yet the light was more intense than in that far northern country, and the sun, when it appeared, almost overhead.

We had as companions a French couple who knew the district well, and they steered us with skill round, or over, the crevasses and boulders perched precariously on clear ice pillars. The Gandegg hut is high on a rocky ridge, and as we neared the edge of the glacier we found on the ice a mummified bat. A butterfly fluttered out from the sun-heated rocks and flew strongly over the glacier: after a time it realised that danger lay in that direction, and returned whence it had come.

We climbed the rocks and, just beneath the ridge, where the snow had lain a week before, came on a thriving colony of that Alpine and Arctic buttercup, *Ranunculus glacialis*, its large white petals pure as the surrounding snow. Near it flowered the delicate and beautiful *Androsace alpina*, a plant not unlike the cushion pink of the high Cairngorms, but the pink flowers smaller and even more closely pressed to the ground.

A snowfinch flew near the hut, which was not yet open. This is the characteristic finch of the Alps, inconspicuous on the ground but beautiful in flight. The white wings drive it fast, and it searches for food for the young at a considerable distance from the nest; it reminds me of the snow bunting of Scotland. On the north side of the hill the ground was still partly snowbound; where it had melted, the ground was red with the purple mountain saxifrage.

10,000 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL.

I have mentioned that for this walk we left the railway at the small and deserted "halt" of Roten Boden. On another day we took the train to the next station, Gornergrat, the terminus of the railway. No greater contrast can be imagined. Here, 10,280 feet above sea level, is a large hotel. We were among the last to leave the train and saw on the platform an elderly lady, fashionably dressed, her hand on her heart, a friend administering cordial. She was evidently feeling the effect of the great altitude. The sky was cloudless and a bitter wind blew from the north. On one side of the ridge people were sunbathing: on the other, climbers shivered in the wind. Flocks of Alpine choughs and a pair of ravens sailed overhead, the choughs descending to eat the discarded remains of the tourists' lunch. Drifting snow rendered faint the summit of Monte Rosa.

Another expedition, again with our French acquaintances which we made, was from Riffelalp, where, at a height of nearly 7300 feet above the sea, we were staying in the large and comfortable Seiler's Hotel, across the Findeln glacier to Fluhalp mountain inn whence we had ascended the Unter Roth Horn, a hill 10,200 feet in height.

The beginning of that walk was through a forest of larch and *Pinus Cembra*. Some of the latter trees were magnificent and reminded me of the outpost pines of the Forest of Mar. They must have been centuries old, but there are younger trees to take their place. Above them, against the cloudless sky, towered the stern peak of the Matterhorn. It was necessary to cut steps on the steep face of the glacier in order to cross it; once across the contrast between the inhospitable ice and the fairyland of Alpine flowers was remarkable. The grassy slopes were blue with *Gentiana verna*, *Gentiana brachyphylla*, and the larger-flowered *Gentiana acaulis*. Among them grew rock rose, tormentil, and the large yellow anemone. The breeze that drifted across to the ice was honey-scented. Butterflies of many species fluttered over the flowers. One of them was sipping the flowers of *silene excapa*, and the pattern on its wings so clearly resembled the flower and leaves of this plant that it was almost invisible. Despite the profusion of flowers there were fewer bees than in the Scottish Highlands.

We climbed by way of a narrow but excellent path, and our French friends, who had visited Scotland in May, remarked on the bad state of the path up Ben Nevis (which they climbed) as compared with the Swiss mountain tracks.

THE ALPINE FORGET-ME-NOT.

When we reached the summit of the Unter Roth Horn we found the snow already gone. The rocks here are of schist and, in full flower at a height of over 10,000 feet was the Alpine forget-me-not, a Swiss name for which is the Hound of Heaven. This lowly plant, of which the Latin name is *Eritrichium Nana*, is found only on very high ground. The small flowers grow from cushions of hairy leaves; the blue of their petals is of an intense quality which is in part due to the strength of the light. Here also the *Gentiana brachyphylla* was in flower, but the cushion pink, a slower grower, was not yet in bud.

We descended into an attractive corrie, carpeted with Alpine willow, and saw feathers of ptarmigan, which must be rare in the Alps, for we have yet to hear one. By a track used by cattle later in the summer we descended towards Zermatt, where the sun had already set. When we saw the prized edelweiss in full flower in the very middle of this track we realised that few persons could pass along it.

The cows had not yet been herded up to the hill pastures. Unless the rain comes, grazing will be bare this summer, for throughout our stay in Switzerland the sun has shone daily. At night the moon rides above the Matterhorn and from my room I have twice seen a spectacular sunrise on this giant of the Alps.

TO OUR READERS.

Owing to lack of space a number of reports in connection with the 1st of August celebration, will only be published in our next issue (August 26th).