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A NEW BEGINNING.

By JEANNETTE ALTWEGG.

(This article is reproduced from the August issue of "The Listener" by courtesy of the Editor.)

I shall begin when I was six years old and lived in Liverpool. That is when I first put on a pair of skates. People often ask me why or how I took up skating. I cannot answer that because I just happened upon it first of all as an amusement. I started in the usual Saturday afternoon crowd of children scrambling all over the ice. I also went with my family to the Sunday Club. When I was ten I had to give up school in order to concentrate more on skating, and I had private schooling. I do not think I missed school at the time, but later I realised that I had missed the companionship of children of my own age — most of my friends at the rink were older than I was. I went in for examinations in both ballet and skating and I also competed in a number of tennis competitions.

From then on I suppose I showed my love and talent for skating, and training became more earnest until, finally, after competing for several years for the world championship, my career brought me to the Olympic Games. When this year of the Olympics came I decided I would finish after the Games whether I won or not. I knew that if I did not win then, I never would. I also realised that I was not satisfied with skating alone. For ten months of the year, six hours a day, I did nothing but skate. It was the only thing I knew how to do, and I could not go on doing it all my life.

For most people it may be very difficult to choose the moment to break away from a long career. It was easy for me. I had just won the Games which meant so much to me, and I had nothing further to hope for in the skating world. Afterwards I took a holiday and wondered what I could do next. Until then the next step had always been obvious, and other people had always decided for me, but now it was up to me. I wanted to do something useful and I felt I was too old to start training for another career. All my life I had been training. Now I wanted to do something practical. The only thing I could think of was to work with children, because I felt I could do this straight away. Almost at the same time I read about the Pestalozzi children's village in Switzerland. I immediately applied for a job and after a few days' stay there decided to take it on for a year. It was a coincidence that I should hear about the children's village just at that time, but things always happen to me like that, and afterwards I wonder why I have worried. It is amazing how difficulties resolve themselves.

Pestalozzi is the name of a very great man who died in 1827. It was his care and education of Swiss war orphans that set the standards and ideals of this present-day children's village. In 1944 Walter Robert Corti first suggested collecting funds for the building of an international village for children who had lost their families in the war. He wrote an article in a Swiss newspaper, and people from all over the world responded to the suggestion, sending money and presents; and 600 volunteers, mostly students, from seventeen different countries, gave up their holidays to come and help build the houses. After two years

the Swiss village authorities asked if British children could take part, because then their village would be more representative. It was then in 1950, that the first thirty British children were sent out. At the same time the British Pestalozzi Children's Village Association was formed. This is the only association of its kind for any one country and its aim is eventually to start another international village in England.

The day at the village starts at six-thirty, and work is then solid until eight o'clock in the evening. A long day — but it needs to be to get through all the washing, ironing, and mending, and the housework. The children do their share of the work and do it extremely well. Of course, there are the usual arguments as to whose turn it is to do the washing up or be odd-job man. I think their life would be miserable if they could not argue!

There are twelve houses in the village and eight nations — French, Italian, Swiss, German, Austrian, Greek, Finnish, and British. Each house has ten to eighteen children, with the house-parents and help from the same country. The house-father is the school-teacher for the national school, and has also, if possible, another trade which he can use for an international lesson. This national school is in the morning; then the children go out to the international lessons in the afternoon. These include music, drawing, cooking, metal work, book binding, and many other things. They all meet for these studies, which are taken in German, so that they become proficient in two languages, as well as learning a third in their national school.

Each week one house is on duty. On the Monday morning there is a little ceremony called *Morgenfeier* and the house receives the flag. It is the Swiss flag, with a streamer which incorporates the flags of all the nations at the village. Village songs are sung and the week's notices read out. This house is then on show for visitors. It is encouraging to see all the interest that is shown, but when a few hundred come in and out, perhaps in wet weather, you can imagine our work is cut out to keep the house spotless and ready for the next inspection. Also, one probably finds that Harry or Michael has left an aeroplane in the making all over the floor of a supposedly tidy room. But Douglas, if he is on duty in his room, can always be relied upon for a spotless job. He also washes most of his own clothes without anyone noticing. He was only twelve when he qualified to enter the Swiss secondary school,



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which is held in German. Three out of our eleven children have passed through so far.

The ideals of this village are well summed up in its motto: Since wars are born in the minds of men, it is in the minds of children that the foundations of peace must be laid. These children were born in the midst of war and until they came to Pestalozzi knew nothing else. I shall always remember Vroni, a little Austrian girl who at first would have nothing to do with the other children, and when they wanted to play with her did not understand what playing was. She was all the time on the defensive and only gradually after careful treatment came to realise that she was now with people who wanted to be friendly.

The children in all the houses have the same Swiss food, and there is plenty of it. Most of them have put on weight since coming to the village, and the good food and healthy situation help to make them look strong and well. But perhaps even more important is the security which some of them are experiencing for the first time in their lives, and one of the greatest rewards for our work is to see the alert happy, and normal expression in the eyes of children who when they came looked only hopeless and frightened — like some of the Greek children, children of bandits, who had never had a home or known their parents. And you can see the change in the lives of these children in their painting, as well. At first they drew brutal pictures of war or suffering — one eight-year-old boy in my kindergarten class made plasticine models of a crucified man with daggers sticking into him, and when I asked him why he did it he said it was something he had seen and remembered. Now, after several years at the village, their drawings are of the mountain scenery and animals, and the activities they take part in.

When these children have finished their schooling they are then apprenticed to some work they are interested in. Preferably, they start work in their own country and the village gives them every help. Of the English children, one has high hopes of becoming a policeman, another a steward on a ship. The Continental children have many different ambitions. Some boys are already starting a career in the hotel business, or as garage mechanics; the girls as nursery school teachers, and one is a hairdresser.

The children play all sorts of games and have plenty of physical training, and football and skiing in the winter — but not, so far, cricket, which is too much of an English sport. And there is swimming in

a nearby pond, also inhabited by many frogs and blue trout, and a couple of ducks. This season starts usually rather earlier than the official time. It is then that boys disappear for rather a long while and pants and vests are suspiciously green and muddy.

There is a good choir and orchestra and they have been for several excursions round Switzerland. They had good practice when a film was in the making in the midst of us. The first month this was a novelty and it was an interesting experience for them, but after a while the hours they spent filming became rather tiring, and after three months I do not think many of them wanted to be film stars.

At this time of the year all the children are away for seven weeks' holiday. They all return to their own countries to relations or friends for these summer holidays. Of course, the week before, they went quite mad. No work was done properly, except the cases which were packed and repacked every day.

It is more wonderful than anything you can imagine to feel the love and confidence these children give you, and the knowledge that you are needed. They may not say thank you in so many words but the way they come to take you for granted and trust you — as they would their own parents — means much more. The job was full of difficulties and when I started I could not have believed that I should learn to cope with the responsibility for these children that was thrust on me, nor would I have thought that I should be able to inspire the children's complete confidence, which they showed in all sorts of ways — coming to me with their problems for comfort and encouragement and in the evening for their goodnight kiss. I always smile when I think that one day if I get married one or two children will seem quite easy after eight boys and three girls.

I shall always be grateful for the opportunity of working with this international group — both with the children and the grown-ups. The leaders have devoted themselves entirely to the children and especially to introducing them to international friendships. In the weekly meeting between the children and the director this ideal of peace between nations is always brought before them through some story of friendship or co-operation in different parts of the world, and in their own small world the children experience this friendship which breaks down all barriers between them — whatever their nationality — and cuts through the misunderstanding which can so easily isolate individuals and countries.

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