

Autumn in the alps

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AUTUMN IN THE ALPS.

By SIR ARNOLD LUNN.

There are, to my mind, two Alpine seasons which are pre-eminent for beauty, Spring and Autumn, but for one traveller who knows the Alps in October there are a hundred who have discovered the beauty of the Alps in April and in May. This, at least, has one compensating advantage. You have the mountains to yourself, for though the Ticino and Lake Lemman areas attract visitors in the autumn, the mountain centres are deserted, and the silence of the hills is seldom disturbed excepting by the tinkle of goat bells and the deeper music of cowbells as the cattle returns to the valley for their long hibernation.

The weather is usually more settled in October than in the summer. Three or four weeks of unbroken fine weather is the rule rather than the exception in October, and this fine weather sometimes continues almost until December.

The mellow golden light of October combines clarity with softness. The details of distant ranges are revealed with a precision which in summer would be a sure sign of imminent rain and yet the harsher contrasts are toned down and subdued by this tender autumn light.

In October the mountain lakes are a miracle of subtle tone and texture. Pools of transparent green break up the surface of darker turquoise. The purple and blood-red of the trees near the lakeside march upwards to the evergreens shot with the gold of the larch. In summer the larch merges into the pine, its individuality lost in the background of dark and sombre green, but in October the larch comes into its own and the flame of its gold mocks the sober puritanism of the evergreens.

It is in November that the first of the snowfalls so often silvers the deciduous foliage. Few mountain scenes are lovelier than golden and purple leaves just showing through a light dusting of snow. Sometimes the snowfall is heavy and I have skied down in November on snowfields bright with the gold of fallen leaves, the hiss of the powder snow, as the ski cut round on a turn, blending with the rustle of the discarded glory of the larch. There is a charming passage in one of Matthew Arnold's letters in which he describes Lucerne in the autumn. He writes:

"We have been at Lucerne, as the schools here are only just reopened, and I wanted to see something of those in a Catholic Canton. At Lucerne we had good weather, and certainly there is no more beautiful place in the whole world. And the blaze of colour now that the rain had brought out the purple that was wanted, the bright green still of the pastures, the black green of the firs, the yellow gold of the poplars, walnuts, chestnuts and wych elms, and the red gold of the beeches, and at the foot of it all the lake, and at the head of it the snowy line with Titlis, a mountain for whom Obermann has always given me a peculiar interest: then Lucerne itself with the curtain of old wall and trees and bridges, and the broad blue-green Reuss going through it. . . I have never seen anything more impressive than Pilatus as we gradually half-rounded him, and more solemn than the whole folding in of the hills, at this autumnal season."

Those who are interested not only in Swiss mountains but also in the Swiss people should take an occasional holiday in October. In summer it is

possible for the non-observant to believe that the majority of the Swiss are occupied directly or indirectly with tourists, but no such illusion is possible in the autumn. The great cattle markets are not as impressive as they were for many cattle dealers visit the cow alps and pick out the best cattle. Even so it is very interesting to visit some such cattle market, in the Simmental for instance.

During the long years of war exile it was in May and in October that my nostalgia for the Alps was most difficult to endure, and never more so than among the mountains of other countries. I remember an autumn afternoon near Madrid. The serene beauty of the Sierra which overlook the Escorial, crested with premature snow, reminded me of the Jura in November. I remembered the Oberland, and the parched green of Bussalp or Scheidegg near Grindelwald showing through the dust of autumn snows and the purple of deciduous foliage, mirrored and reversed in the ultramarine of Brienz. I crossed the Atlantic six times in the war and in 1942 I spent a few days in Vermont. The Midas touch of autumn had turned the maples to gold and the silver thread of the river wound through woods almost as beautiful as the autumn woods near Montreux or Interlaken, but there was a sad emptiness in the sky where the Jungfrau or Dents-du-Midi might have been and instead of being grateful for the beauty of Vermont I was sad because I missed the greater beauty of Switzerland.

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