

Home affairs

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HOME AFFAIRS.

By PIERRE BÉGUIN.

"The evolution of a small country."

When it is said of Switzerland that she is 'one and divers', many foreigners, even those who think that they know us well, imagine that an allusion is thus being made to our linguistic differences, as well as to those of a religious or folk-lore order, to our popular festivals which change in character from valley to valley, to our national costumes of which there are a great number and, finally, to all our various customs which generally belong to a single village and rarely to a whole district.

As a matter of fact, these Helvetic diversities go much deeper than this. In order to demonstrate this, we will take as an example — a very characteristic one — the Canton of Valais. This Canton is formed by a long valley, traversed by the Rhône. On both sides of this valley there rise very high mountains, the Bernese Alps and the Alpes valaisannes, that is to say, the highest summits in our country. From the bottom of the valley there branch out lateral valleys in which, for a very long time, the essential part of the life of the country was concentrated.

Only twenty or thirty years ago each of these small valleys led an autonomous existence. Each one of them possessed its own dialect, its customs and its traditions. The inhabitants went in for farming an extremely rugged and difficult soil. There were craftsmen everywhere, so that each little valley sufficed for itself, more or less, and was not dependent on the principal valley. It may be said, without exaggeration, that in these remote regions life had not changed at all during the course of the three or four last centuries.

One of the first changes to take place came as a result of tourism. When alpinism became the fashion hotels were built all over the place, and the paths were replaced by roads. This change, however, was not very profound; the population made a living out of tourism, it benefited from it, but it was not really influenced by the arrival of the foreigners.

A more important change dates from some forty years ago, and this change is due to the improvement brought to the land in the principal valley. For a long time past the latter had been devastated by the over-flowing of the Rhône. Thanks however to the carrying out of important work and thanks also to the financial help of the Confederation and the energy of a handful of men, this desert has been transformed into a magnificent garden, producing quantities of fruit. And in this way the traditional cultivation of the soil has been replaced by a very modern type of cultivation.

To-day, however, and in fact since about ten years ago, the transformations are taking place on an increased scale and at an increasingly rapid pace. This is due to the establishment of some plants in the valley of the Rhône. It is due more especially to the construction of hydro-electric dams in the lateral valleys. Artificial lakes are being created everywhere. Enormous construction jobs are to be found everywhere. Industrial power is making its force felt there, where formerly only an ancestral manner of life was known.

And it is thus that the inhabitants of this part of the country, which lies quite close to some of the most highly developed regions of Switzerland, have, during the space of a few years, made a leap forward in a history of several centuries. They were herdsmen, small autonomous farmers, modest craftsmen, who lived away from modern life. To-day one finds them on the roads, on the construction jobs, collaborating in the building of important projects. Without any transition they have become workers in the most modern sense of that word. And, concurrently, one sees the villages perched on the high mountains becoming gradually depopulated to such an extent that some of them have already been completely abandoned. Those who leave, thinking that their stay in the plants or on the construction jobs will only be brief and serve merely for the purpose of temporarily earning a little money, do not return. They keep their land, but they no longer farm it.

Regret may be felt at this evolution, for we see the disappearance of a manner of life that was picturesque and dear to us. But one has to admit that this life was too hard for the mountain folk. For a long time they did not realize this; and then they learnt it quite suddenly. In this way we are now witnessing the disappearance of an old society, whilst a new one is being erected. Just think of all the revolutions comprised in this, especially in the minds of the people. The conquests of technique are admirable. If a wise evolution does not take care, however, to prepare the necessary stages of progress, the eddies are numerous, and though the hands follow the movement, it is very difficult for the minds to adapt themselves.

