

St. Gall

Autor(en): **Gibbon, Monk**

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ST. GALL

by

MONK GIBBON

I had imagined St. Gall to be an industrialised city in one of the flattest and least attractive parts of the country. This is what happens when one hears a place described as "an important centre of industry". But St. Gall's industry in the past has been textiles and embroidery, much of which was done in the neighbouring Appenzell farmsteads. And instead of factory chimneys belching forth smoke I found myself in a clean, staid city with as pleasant surroundings as any city could wish. It is the highest of the large towns in Switzerland, and one of the highest towns in Europe, being well over 2,000 feet above sea level. One realises this when one drives to the lake of Constance, and the road descends, never very abruptly, but steadily down, down, always down, until there seems no end to it.

In St. Gall I would waken to the sounds of the erection of the market tables and stalls in the square below my hotel window. In London, Covent Garden is astir early enough, but in Swiss cities it is not a question of one particular quarter getting off the mark early. The farmers aim at invading the towns hard upon dawn and to be gone again soon after midday, and in St. Gall, Lausanne, Berne, Geneva or Zurich you will find whole streets bordered with flowers and vegetables which still seem to have the dew of the morning on them and which for the most part will have been carried away by their purchasers before ten o'clock. Sometimes, instead of stalls, baskets of produce are laid out either side of the street and you pass down a double row of multi-coloured and variegated vegetation so fresh that it might almost still be growing.

About the year A.D.612 an itinerant Irish Monk, St. Gallus (canonised 1805), made a hermitage on the banks of the Steinach, and began to convert the people of the district to Christianity. Soon a Benedictine Abbey was founded, and there were Irish monks teaching in St. Gall as late as the ninth century.

A large part of the monastery and the Bishop's Palace are today the seat of the cantonal government, looking across a vast open square toward the cathedral, which was rebuilt in 1756, and must be among the finest examples of late baroque or rococo in Europe. It is no longer as fashionable as it once was to sneer at rococo, and I personally agree with Kees van Hoek when he rhapsodies about the "space and colour and joyful exuberance" of this vast building, "as if it were not a church but a drawing-room for the heavenly courts".

At the back of the cathedral, on the far side of a great cloistered courtyard where schoolboys play, one finds the entrance to the famous Abbey Library. Here you can see a seventh-century Latin-German vocabulary, said to be St. Gallus's own, and the oldest vocabulary of its kind in existence. As well there is an eighth-century Virgil; a large, ninth-century plan of the monastery, the earliest architectural plan that has come down to us; a thirteenth-century Nibelungenlied and numerous superb examples of illuminated manuscripts in both Celtic and other styles. You can also see the mummy of an Egyptian princess with white teeth and shrivelled blackened skin, a better *memento mori* than the porcelain series of Holbein's

"Dance of Death" which greets you in several of the Swiss museums. The library itself is a work of art, and you are asked before you enter it to put on huge grey felt overslipppers to protect its lovely floor of nutwood, inlaid with cherrywood. Slender curved wooden pillars ending in cypress roots support a graceful balcony "hanging like a garland all along the four walls", and all round wherever the eye travels, are books in cases with doors of gilt trellis work, except where an occasional picture hangs or where the architect has allowed his woodcarvers to indulge their fancy with magnificent effect.

I found kind friends in St. Gall. Dr Moser chose a spring-like day (though actually it was mid-September) to take me walking on the Peter and Paul hill, along a country road forbidden to motor-cars, and through pleasant orchards, and gave me lunch in idyllic surroundings looking down across the intervening stretch of country toward Lake Constance eleven or twelve miles away. I learnt that the bombing of towns on the German side of the lake during the war used to break the windows in Romanshorn on the Swiss side. Had Constance been bombed at the foot of the lake, Kreuzlingen, which is directly joined to it, must inevitably have suffered. But fortunately Constance had nothing which would present a military target. Schaffhausen, on the other hand, the only important Swiss town which lies on the left bank of the Rhine, and which has a really extensive hinterland that side of the river, was bombed by an American plane by mistake; many people were killed and part of its museum with a number of paintings was destroyed. Allied planes used to cross Swiss territory occasionally. I understand that the order to the Swiss anti-aircraft guns was "Shoot, but be very careful you don't hit".

I spent a pleasant evening dining with Professor Wildi and his clever Swedish wife. They explained to me that a greater Swiss writer even than Gottfried Keller awaited my attention — Pastor Bitzius (1797-1854) or Jeremias Gotthelf, to give him his better-known pen-name.

Other kind friends to me in St. Gall were the directors of the Institut Rosenberg, a big international school for boys on the hill overlooking the station. One gains the impression that the Rosenberg, like Bedales in England, and like the International School in Geneva, or Chatelard, the English girls' school at Les Avants, stands for liberal educational ideals in an ordered environment.

Dr. Lattman of the school said that he would take me and another Italian guest for a drive. We started off at a tremendous pace and when I asked where were we going I learnt "To the Santis!" So once more I found myself in the cable car, hanging over a dizzy drop of thousands of feet. Once more I walked on the terrace outside the restaurant and flung morsels of bread to the red-legged choughs, who swooped for them with extraordinary grace, closing their wings to fall sheer, and — as soon as they have passed the falling piece of bread — glided forward under it with a rhythmic swoop, which seemed scarcely allied to any perceptible adjustment of wing but rather a matter of mere volition.

Another afternoon Dr. Lattman drove me down through the meadows and orchards of Thurgau to Romanshorn and then along the lake to Kreuzlingen and presently to Arenenberg Castle where the ex-Queen Hortense of Holland lived, and made herself so loved by the district that the canton naturalized both her and her son, the future Napoleon II. Louis Napoleon performed his service in the Swiss Army, and when, after the early and disastrous Strasburg incident, the French angrily demanded that he should be handed over to them, the Swiss mobilized rather than surrender their adopted citizen. The latter, however, solved an impasse that looked like leading to war by leaving the country. The Swiss never forget their friends. The canton du Vaud, for example, has reason to be grateful even to Napoleon I, who abolished a *status quo* which was not much to their advantage, and the art gallery of Geneva lists him in letters of gold upon a marble tablet amongst their other donors and patrons. The concierge of the gallery smiled when I commented mischievously, "Yes, with works of art that he had probably looted elsewhere!" But of the goodness of heart of Bonaparte's mother, or of his sister Hortense, there can be no doubt, and few people would grudge her the sanctuary of this manor house, rather than "castle", in Arenenberg, looking down on the Untersee, and where she died in 1837. The ex-Empress Eugenie bequeathed it to the canton of Thurgau in 1906 together with its various Napoleonic collections. As association items the latter are interesting, but are also an eloquent comment upon the execrable taste of the period.

Only half an hour from St. Gall by tram is Trogen, the seat of government for Outer Rhodes. Looking down on Trogen from one of the green hillsides above it is the famous Pestalozzi village which grew out of a suggestion of Walter Corti, the author. Here, grouped in separate chalets according to their nationality, and with a "father" and a "mother" who speak their own language, refugee children from Austria, Finland, Germany, Poland, Hungary and other war-scarred countries are brought up speaking their own tongue, lending a hand with the housework and gardening, getting a good general education, and if possible a trade, and preparing for a day when they will return to their own country as ambassadors of goodwill among the different races and nations. The Pestalozzi village is an example of Swiss idealism functioning on a really large scale. In a world of such chaos as our own, it may seem only a token payment, but it is a payment which has deep significance.

When I left St. Gall I went to Schaffhausen, paying a visit first to Stein-am-Rhein, on the stretch of Rhine below the Untersee, or lower lake of Constance. Stein-am-Rhein is little more than a village, basking in the sunshine on the north bank of the river. You can eat your lunch on the sun-drenched balcony of a restaurant above the smoothly-flowing water. You are back in the Middle Ages almost; time has stood still and will stand still here for ever, it seems, in this placid spot. The painted fronts of the houses, the Rathaus with its stained-glass and Gothic windows, and, above all, the small fourteenth century Abbey of St. George which housed ten monks, till it was

secularized in 1526 — all this carries you back into history so gently, so imperceptibly, that you seem veritably to be breathing the air of a past age. The Abbey was saved from further vicissitudes — it had been a silk-ribbon factory and a school amongst other things — and lovingly restored in 1875, thanks to the insistence of a son that his father, a Swiss pastor, should buy it. I sat at a little table in the bow window of the Abbot's own dining-room, its lovely ceiling decorated with painted wood carvings of the six symbols of Christ, the Phoenix, the Hen, the Elephant, the Pelican, the Gryphon and the Lion, while in the very centre St. George contends with the dragon. Starlings chattered in the garden outside, below me flowed the Rhine, flanked on one side by Lombardy poplars and with a single boat moored near a sandy pit at the end of a low green island upstream. Every corner of this rambling building is full of interest and beauty, and it is fitting that now the Confederation owns it it should publicly honour the names of two men: David von Winkelsheim, the last abbot, who "thanks to his interest in art, architecture and humanism made it an everlasting memorial"; and Professor Vetter, whose testimonial reads "The last private owner of the convent has to be considered as the saviour of this place of culture. Inherited from his father he carefully preserved it in its ancient style, saving it from profanation. In virtue of his merits his ashes are kept in honour in this place".

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