

Holidays in Switzerland

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HOLIDAYING IN SWITZERLAND

I had been working very hard during the long, hot summer without a single day of rest, harassed by insomnia and its usual companion, despondency. I was irritable with my patients, ill-tempered with everybody; and when autumn came, even my phlegmatic friend Norstrom began to lose his patience with me. At last he informed me one day, when we were dining together, that unless I went away at once for a three weeks' rest cure in a cool place, I should go to pieces altogether. Capri was too hot; Switzerland was the right place for me.

I had always bowed to my friend's superior common-sense. Three days later I arrived in Zermatt, and set to work at once to find out whether life above the snow-line was more cheerful than below it.

The ice-axe became a new toy for me to play with in the old game of lose and win between life and death. I began where most other climbers end — with the Matterhorn. Roped to the ice-axe on a slanting rock twice the size of my dining-room table, I spent the night under the shoulder of the angry mountain in a raging snowstorm. I was interested to learn from my two guides that we were hanging on to the very rock from where Hadow, Hudson, Lord Francis Douglas and Michel Croz were hurled down on to the Matterhorn glacier four thousand feet below during Whymper's first ascent. At daybreak we came upon Burckhardt. I scratched the fresh snow from his face, peaceful and still as that of a man asleep. He had frozen to death. At the foot of the mountain we overtook his two guides, dragging between them his half-dazed companion, Davies, whose life they had saved at the peril of their own.

Two days later the Schreckhorn, the sullen giant, hurled his usual avalanche of loose rocks against the intruders. He missed us, but it was a fine shot anyhow at such a distance, for a piece of rock that would have smashed a cathedral thundered past us at a distance of less than twenty yards. A couple of days later, as dawn was breaking in the valley below, our bewitched eyes watched the Jungfrau putting on her immaculate robe of snow. We could just see the virgin's rosy cheek under her white veil.

I started at once to conquer the enchantress. It looked at first as if she might say yes, but when I tried to pluck a few Edelweiss from the hem of her mantle she suddenly got shy and went to hide herself behind a cloud. Try as I might, I never succeeded in approaching her. The more I advanced, the further she seemed to draw away from me. Soon a shroud of vapour and mist, all aglow with sunrays, hid her entirely from our view like the screen of fire and smoke that descends round her virgin sister Brünnhilde in the last act of *The Valkyrie*. An old witch whose business it was to watch over the fair maiden like a jealous old nurse, allured us farther and farther away from our goal among desolated crags and yawning precipices ready to engulf us at any moment. Soon the guides declared that they had lost their way, and that nothing remained but to return from where we came, and the sooner the better.

Defeated and lovesick, I was dragged down to the valley again by the stout rope of my two guides. No wonder I was downhearted — it was the second time that year I had been thrown over by a young lady. But youth is a great healer of heart wounds. With a little sleep and a cool head one soon gets over them. Sleep I got but little, but luckily I did not lose my head. The following Sunday I smoked my pipe on the top of Mont Blanc.

AXEL MUNTHE, *The Story of San Michele*.



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