

In praise of the Ticino

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Zeichnung / Dessin: Roland Duss

IN PRAISE OF THE TICINO

STANLEY MASON

Switzerland is a house of many mansions, and its southernmost chamber is flooded with sun. At the St. Bernard the Canton of the Valais reaches almost as far south as the Canton of Ticino at Chiasso, but the Southern Valais is an austere white garden of peaks reaching up towards 15,000 feet into the eternal frost, while the Ticino is the very opposite: a terrace sloping down from the Alps towards the south, a solarium catching the full glory of the sun. The mountains in the Northern Ticino rise to 10,000 feet, but the lakes in the south lie at a mere 600 feet, and the deepest underwater dells and dingles of Lago Maggiore are well below the level of the sea.

No wonder the hearts of the Germanic tribes that inhabit the less hospitable northern slopes of the Alps yearn for this sunny Italianate oasis in the south. German-speaking Swiss and Germans, trapped under deep strata of November fog or whipped by sleety north-westerly winds, dream of a cottage here in the mild and sunnier south. The almost sub-tropical vegetation of the Ticino has become a symbol for them of a happier clime: the palms that line the streets of Locarno and Lugano, the camelias that blossom in February, the bright springs a-blow with the yellow of mimosa trees; and at the fall of the year the branches laden with figs, the dark-green foliage of the pomegranates where the fruit hang like vermilion lampions, the rich, heavy harvest of the bloomy purple grapes. Many of them nurture this dream till they retire, then move south into the landscape of their choice. There is in fact a steady invasion of folk from the north, some coming only for a brief break from everyday toils, some coming to stay. German-speaking immigrants form agglomerations in many places. There was a time in Ascona, for instance, when German

was the first and ubiquitous language, and an incensed Ticinesan shopkeeper caused a great stir by putting a sign outside his shop which read: "Here Italian is spoken too."

For the Ticino belongs clearly to the Italian linguistic and cultural sphere. The dialect Ticinesans speak is a purely Italian one, not pervaded with Germanic elements like Romansh. For centuries they were a poor peasant people, and many of them still are. Those of them who prospered did so not in their own canton, but in the world outside. The meagre living the soil offered drove many of them to seek their fortune abroad. As builders and architects, as craftsmen and even as roast-chestnut vendors some of them did well and were able to return to their villages as made men. But most of the rich who entered the Ticino were to remain strangers from the north. These Northerners still come and buy land, build luxurious villas and holiday bungalows, sometimes settle down, but are not so often assimilated. The sale of land has recently helped some Ticinesans to unexpected wealth, but one cannot really speak of an affluent society, and in the valleys a measure of poverty still persists. Yet they have borne their fate with a good grace, and this is surely another reason why Northerners are so glad to come here: because the people have preserved a human warmth and simplicity. They have none of the organized efficiency, the business-like, hard-boiled materialism of the North. They seem to have become reconciled to the axiom that those who inhabit the Happy Isles must expect invasions. And they are willing to sit down and drink a glass of wine with the invader.

Three roads lead from the north into the Ticino. From the Grisons the Via Mala—the Bad Road, that once romantically deserved its name—

climbers up to the San Bernardino Pass, whence hairpin bends cascade down towards Mesocco. From Disentis the less frequented Lucomagno crosses into the Blenio Valley, known as the Valley of the Sun, upon whose lovely slopes the scattered villages entice the wanderer. But the main route is the great Gotthard Pass, whose tortuous sinuosities on the Ticino side make a wonderfully photogenic pattern when viewed from some high vantage point, but at close quarters strike panic into the hearts of many a foreign motorist.

The entry into the Ticino is marked by a gradual but fundamental metamorphosis of the landscape and the human scene. In the villages the houses change their shape, becoming simpler, more rectilinear, yet instilled with some of the fine and balanced harmony of the Renaissance. Churches no longer have bulbous spires but are often Romanesque, sober and well-proportioned in ancient stone. Chapels come into view, perched in seeming inaccessibility on rocky heights. Here and there one catches sight of an old woman in black working in the fields. Around human habitations the strict order and cleanliness of the German-Swiss give place to a more happy-go-lucky and picturesque negligence. After Bellinzona, over which three ancient castles stand guard in a last gesture of splendid mediaeval defiance, the plain of the River Ticino opens up into a kind of wide serenity, a genial grandeur unknown beyond the Alps. For the traveller by train this metamorphosis can be partly packed into a matter of minutes in a topographical experience that comes nearer to a miracle than any other I know of. I shall never forget my own first entry into the Ticino. Up in the north the spring was late coming. Cold showers and sudden frosts had continually blighted our hopes. As we now climbed the ramp to Göschenen the leaden skies were blotted out by a blizzard of draughty snow. We plunged into the Gotthard tunnel, and my Dutch colleague's talk of better weather beyond seemed to me the empty prating of a wishful thinker. I had not learnt that the great mass of the Gotthard, reaching up into the sky, sets a sea-mark even for the winds and clouds, dividing weather from weather.

And suddenly we were out of the darkness and into the light: from an ultramarine sky a dazzling sun shone down on a green world that rose to crystal peaks. We were elated, and half-blind with the brilliance. Farther south, the climatic difference was no less astonishing. While news from those we had left behind in the north still told of cold and dreary days of rain, we wandered in shirt-sleeves through a sun-drenched world. The big magnolias were bursting in exotic blossom, the woods were wild and sweet with violets. We walked from the crest of the San Salvatore above Lugano across to Morcote, that clings like some show-piece of southern scenic beauty over the blue waters of the lake. Wherever we turned, basking lizards started from the stones, becoming for me, as I suppose

they have become for others, almost the heraldic beast of the Ticino: small, nimble little creatures that cling to the granite like greenish gems, motionless till some movement alarms them, and they are gone.

In the intervening years the Ticino has ceased to be what it was for me at that first encounter—an almost incredible landscape out of a fairy-tale—and become a familiar yet no less desirable home from home. And little by little it has revealed its many facets. For the Ticino is not only what the tourist sees in the bright, colourful days of spring or summer, strolling along the lakeside or under the arcades of Lugano and Locarno. In the high valleys it has also preserved much of its rich individuality and charm. Indemini still has something of the aspect of a robbers' hide-away when one looks down on its clustered stone roofs in the green and precipitous gorge. True, one is no longer aware of suspicious eyes observing one stealthily from windows, as my wife and I were when we first walked through its cobbled alleyways. The tourists have discovered it, and in summer at least one can pass through it without a feeling that one is trespassing on forbidden ground. No less fascinating, Corippo still adheres to the hillside in the high Verzasca Valley, a small maze of steep cobbled ways between stone houses, pervaded with the almost tangible sense of a simple century-old tradition. True, our technical and touristic age is affecting the scene.

Once to "go to Corippo by boat" was the local wag's paraphrase of the impossible, since the Verzasca was a small rock-strewn torrent and the valley was steep; but today from Corippo's eyrie one can already see the waters of the new storage lake glint below in the sunlight.

Times change, but the inimitable charm of the Ticino and its cheerful people does not wither. I have felt it so often: on the lake at four o'clock of a dim, pellucid dawn, watching the fish fall from the nets like silver into a gently rocking boat; wandering through an unbelievable wilderness of Alpine flowers beyond Lake Ritom; rowing lazily on a warm, somnolent afternoon where Gandria's romantic houses were mirrored in the lake below; sitting before an open fire under black beams while chestnuts roasted in a long-handled pan over the blaze; stepping from rock to patterned rock in the bed of the foaming Maggia; or standing in the windy sun above Locarno when the whole hillside was ablaze with the yellow conflagration of the broom.

The reader will note: here is another Northerner who has fallen under the spell. And why should I demur? Perhaps my case is less curable than others, for when I married, it was a girl born and bred on the shores of the Lago Maggiore. But even without this bond I believe I should have succumbed as completely and finally as any of the numerous other travellers who, crossing the Gotthard, have found beyond it a landscape cut to the measure of their dream.

VILLAGGI DALL'ALTO

Cessato il bosco, apparvero i villaggi
(ciascuno, un gruppo di casette bianche),

quattro villaggi l'un sull'altro, questo
sotto, ben sotto
i nostri piedi;
l'altro più innanzi
(arrivava ai ginocchi);
l'ultimo infine in pari al nostro viso.

Fu mezzogiorno, e i quattro
villaggi ne gettarono l'annuncio;

sonanti qui, sonanti là: gagliardi
più che festosi, vere voci d'uomo.

GIUSEPPE ZOPPI

Eine Rundfahrt mit den Cars der Schweizer Alpenposten durch das Val Colla im Hinterland von Lugano bringt das Erlebnis üppiger südlicher Vegetation und die Begegnung mit den ersten Alpweiden. Ein einzigartiges Gepräge geben diesem Tal die Felszähne der Denti della Vecchia, 1494 m, im Grenzgrat zwischen dem Tessin und Italien. Im Vordergrund unseres Bildes steht der schlanke Kirchturm von Bidogno.

Le voyageur qui franchit en auto postale le Val Colla, dans l'arrière-pays de Lugano, traverse une nature luxuriante. La vallée est dominée par les Denti della Vecchia, dont les arêtes bizarrement découpées se dressent sur le ciel pur (1494 m); elles marquent la frontière italo-suisse. Au premier plan: l'élégant clocher de Bidogno.

Una gita in Val Colla, nel retroterra di Lugano, porta il passeggero dalla pianura, dove prospera copiosa una vegetazione meridionale. Le punte rocciose dei Denti della Vecchia, 1494 m, sono caratteristica dominante e inconfondibile del paesaggio. Sullo sfondo, l'agile campanile di Bidogno.

An excursion on a Swiss Alpine Post Bus through the Val Colla in the country behind Lugano reveals how the luxuriant southern vegetation merges with the first Alpine pastures. This valley is very memorable owing to the craggy Denti della Vecchia, 4482 ft., in the frontier range separating the Ticino and Italy. In the foreground of our view appears the slender church tower of Bidogno.

Photo Giegel SVZ

