

be found to be very few noteworthy pictures of scenes in the upper regions. In the second place, I am really ashamed to have made so little reference to our own beautiful hill-countries of the Lakes, North Wales, and Scotland, many parts of which I know much better than any part of the Alps, and love quite as much. Their wildest recesses want painting nearly as much as do the Alps, but perhaps they fall outside the scope of such a paper as the present, addressed as it is to members of the Alpine Club.

And now I have done. Probably what I have said that is new is not altogether true, and certainly anything true is not new; but what else was to be expected in a paper which treats of a subject 'as old as the hills'?

LIFE IN THE VISPTHAL AT THE BEGINNING OF THE
SIXTEENTH CENTURY.* By W. M. CONWAY.

‘SO far as I (Thomas Platter) can discover by memory and question, I was born in the year 1499. I came into the world on Shrove Tuesday, when they were ringing the people together to Mass. I know this because my friends always hoped that I should be a priest, since, just when I was born, the bell was ringing for Mass.

‘I had a sister named Christina. She was alone with my mother, and was my nurse and opened my eyes. My father was named Anthoni Platter, of the old family of Platters,† who take their name from a house which stands on a broad rock plateau on a very high mountain, by a village called Grenchen in the tithing and parish of Visp, a notable

by Mr. Murray. It is copiously illustrated, and deals largely with mountain scenery. [See last number of the ‘Alpine Journal.’—ED.]

* Translated and curtailed from the Autobiographies of Thomas and Felix Platter: printed at Basle in 1840, and edited by Dr. D. A. Fechter.

† The family Platter or Blatter was originally the same as that of Aufdenblatten, numerous descendants of which are to be found in Zermatt to-day. There were also Platters at Zermatt down to the end of the 18th century, but now they are only to be found lower down the valley, especially at and about Visp. Several Platters have been famous in their day. Two were bishops of Sion; one of them (✠ 1752) gave a large sum towards defraying the cost of the present high altar of the parish church of Zermatt, and on it his arms are carved. See J. Ruden, ‘Familien-Statistik der löblichen Pfarrei von Zermatt’ (Ingenbohl, Kt. Schwyz, 1870), pp. 8–10.

town and tithing in Wallis. My mother was named Amilli (Anna Maria) Summermatter; she was of the very large family of Summermatters, whose father was one hundred and twenty-six years old. Six years before his death, I talked with him myself, and he told me that he knew ten men besides in the parish of Visp who were all older than he then was. When he was a hundred years old he married a woman of thirty and had a son by her. He left behind him sons and daughters, of whom some were grown white, some grey, before he died. We called him "the old Hans Summermatter." The house in which I was born is at Grenchen, and is called "an den Graben."

Owing to family circumstances the little Thomas had to be weaned very young. 'This,' he says, 'was the beginning of my sorrows. I had then to drink cow's milk through a little horn, as is the custom in our country when children are weaned, for they are often not given anything to eat till they are four or five years old, but only milk to suck. My father died so early in my life that I cannot remember having ever seen him. As it is the custom in our country for all the women to weave and sew, the men usually go away before winter to the Bern district to buy wool, which the women spin and make into cloth for coats and breeches. Accordingly, my father went to Thun in the Bern district to buy wool, and there fell in with the pestilence, and died and was buried at Stäfyssburg, a village near Thun.

'Soon afterwards my mother married again, and took a man named Heintzman of the Grund, a house between Visp and Stalden. So all her children left her, I do not know exactly how many of them there were. Of my brothers and sisters I knew two sisters; one called Elizabeth died in the Entlebuch, where she was married; the other was named Christina, she died of a pestilence along with eight others up above Stalden in Bürgen. Of the brothers I know one was named Simon, one Hans, one Joder. Simon and Hans were killed in the wars, Joder died at Oberhofen on the lake of Thun. For our father was in the hands of usurers, so that almost all my brothers and sisters had to go out to service as soon as they were able. Because I was the youngest, my aunts, my father's sisters, each had me in turn.'

Thomas Platter proceeds to relate certain stories, of little interest, about his infancy, amongst others how, at the age of three years, he marched alone into the village church one high day, and got himself confirmed by no less a person

than Cardinal Matthew Schiner, to the amusement of the prelate and the consternation of the absent godfather. We take up his story at a later point.

‘When I was about six years old I was taken to Eisten, a valley within Stalden, where my mother’s sister was married to a man, by name Thomas an Riedijn, who lived in a farm called Imboden. The first year I had to tend the kids for him near the house. There I remember once sticking fast in the snow, so that I could scarcely get out. I had to leave my shoes behind in it and come home barefoot. The same peasant owned about eighty goats, which I had to tend in my seventh and eighth years. I was still so small that, when I opened the goat-pen, if I did not spring quickly behind the door, the goats knocked me down and trod upon my head, ears, and back. When I drove the goats across the Visp over the bridge, those in front ran into the corn-fields, and when I drove them out the rest ran in, so I wept and cried, for I knew well that I should be beaten at night. However, the goatherds of other peasants came to me and helped me, one big boy especially, Thomas of the Leidenbach. He pitied me and did me much kindness. So when we drove the goats up into the high and terrible mountains, we all sat and ate together. Each one had a shepherd’s wallet fastened on his back, with cheese and rye bread in it.

‘Once on a time when we had eaten, we set to throwing stones. It was on a level place above a high precipice. As we were throwing at the rock, each after the other, one stood before me about to throw, and I, stepping back out of his way, that he might not hit me on the head or face, fell backwards over the precipice. The goatherds all cried out “Jesus! Jesus!” till they could see me no more, for as I had fallen below the rocks out of their sight, they quite thought that I was killed. I was soon on my feet again and went round the rocks up to them; so they cried first for grief and then for joy. Six weeks later, a goat fell over the same place and was killed; so God preserved me well.

‘Perhaps about half a year afterwards, I drove my goats again early one morning before the other goatherds (for I was the nearest) up over a spur, called the Wysseggen. There my goats went to the right hand up a little rock, a good stride broad, below which was a terrible precipice, certainly more than a thousand feet high—sheer rock. From the little rock one goat went after another up a steep place, their little hoofs clinging to the bunches of grass growing among the rocks. When they had all gone up I

wanted to follow them, but I had not taken more than one step up the grass before I could go no farther, nor could I step back upon the steep place, and I dared still less jump backwards, for I feared, if I did so, I should roll down and fall over the terrible precipice. So I remained a long while standing and waited for the help of God, being no longer able to help myself, except by holding on with both hands to a tuft of grass and standing with my great toe upon another tuft. When I was tired I raised myself off the tuft and put my other toe there. In this plight I was most afraid of the great lammergeiers, which were flying in the air below me; for I feared they would carry me off, as sometimes happens in the Alps, when lammergeiers carry off children or lambs. While I was standing thus, the wind blowing my jacket about behind, for I had no breeches on, my comrade Thomas saw me from afar but knew not what it was, for as he saw my coat blowing he thought it was a bird. When however he saw me plainly he grew pale with fright, and called out to me, "Now, little Tommy, stand still!" and then he climbed up the little rock, took me by the arm and drew me up to where we could climb up to the goats.

'Amongst others of my father's sisters was one unmarried, to whom my father had especially commended me, inasmuch as I was the youngest. People were always coming and telling her what hard work I had to do, and how I should assuredly one day fall and be killed. So she went to my master and told him she would no longer leave me there. Notwithstanding his displeasure she carried me off back to Grenchen, where I was born, and gave me to a rich old peasant, Jans Imboden by name, for whom also I had to mind the goats. It happened one day that I and a little girl, who also was minding her father's goats, had taken our meal by a small canal (*wasser-leiter*), with which they convey water from the mountains to the fields. We had fashioned little meadows and watered them, as children do; meantime our goats went off up the mountain, whither we knew not. So I left my coat lying there, and went up all the height of the mountain, whilst the girl went home without her goats: I, however, a poor little servant, durst not come home, and the goats not with me. High up I found a young chamois, quite like one of my goats. I followed after him at a distance till the sun went down. Then I looked down upon the village, and saw that it was black night there by the houses, so I began to descend, but night soon came on. Still I climbed straight down from tree to tree (the trees were larches, from

which resin flows), holding on to the roots, for some of the roots were free, the soil on the steep slopes having separated from them. When it was quite dark, and I found that the slope was very steep, I determined to go no farther, but held on to a root with my left hand, whilst with the other I scratched the soil away from under the roots of the tree and heard it go rolling down. Then I wedged my shoulders and back under the roots. I had nothing on but my little shirt, neither shoes nor hat; my coat I had left behind by the canal through fear when I found that the goats were gone. As I lay under the tree the ravens found me out, and shrieked at the tree, so I was full of dread, for I feared a bear might be at hand. I crossed myself and went to sleep, and remained sleeping till the morning sun shone over all the mountains. When I awoke and saw where I was, I was more horrified than I ever remember in my life; for, if I had gone down two feet lower, I must have fallen over a horrible precipice a full thousand feet high. Then was I in great anxiety as to how I should get away. I drew myself up again from root to root till I reached a place whence I could run down the mountain towards the houses. When I was out of the wood near the fields, a girl met me with my goats, which she was driving out again, for they had come home of themselves at night. The folk for whom I worked had been much frightened because I did not come back with the goats, and thought that I must have fallen and been killed. They asked my aunt and the people living in the house where I was born (which is next to the house where I was serving), whether they knew anything about me, for I had not come home with the goats. My aunt and my master's old wife spent all the night upon their knees, praying God to preserve me if I were still alive. After this I was no longer allowed to mind goats, because of the fright I had given them.

‘Once, while I was my master’s goatherd, I fell into a great caldron of hot milk which was upon the fire, and scalded myself so badly that I have borne the marks all my life long. Whilst I was with the same master I was in danger twice besides. Once we two little goatherds were in the wood talking of many a childish thing—amongst the rest, how we wished we could fly, then would we fly away over the mountains out of that country into Germany, as in Wallis they call the Confederation. Then a terribly big bird came and hovered about us, so that we thought he would carry off one or both of us. We began to cry aloud

and strike out with our shepherd's staves and cross ourselves, till the bird flew away. Then we talked together, how we had done wrong to wish for wings, for God made us not to fly, but to walk (*gott hette uns nit geschaffen zfliegen sunder zgan*). Another time I was in a steep gully looking for crystals, of which many are found there. High up I saw a stone, as large as a stove, leaping down; and, as I could not get aside from it, I bent forward on my face. The stone fell some feet above me and then leaped over me, bounding high into the air.

'I had a tolerably good life and much happiness with the goats in the mountains, which I have forgotten; what I know well is, that I was seldom sound of foot, but blistered and wounded; I often had bad falls; went usually in summer barefoot or with wooden clogs. I suffered such thirst that I have often cut myself in the hand and sucked that for relief. My food was, in the morning before daybreak, a rye cake; cheese and rye bread they gave me to carry with me in a wallet on my back; at night hot butter-milk; but of all this plenty. In summer I lay in hay; in winter, on a sack of straw, full of bugs and often lice. Thus the poor goat-herds usually lie who serve the peasants in the wild country.

'When I was no longer allowed to mind the goats, I came to a peasant, who was the husband of one of my aunts. He was stingy and passionate. I had to mind his cows, for in most places in Wallis they have no common cowherd, but whoever has no alp to send his cows up to in summer keeps a cowherd to look after them in his own fields. When I had been with this man for some time, one of my aunts, named Fransy, came to take me to my uncle, Herr Anthoni Platter, that I might learn the writing, as they say when they put any one to school. The Herr was no longer living at Grenchen, but was grown an old man at S. Niklaus, in the hamlet called Gasen. When the peasant, who was known as Antscho or Anthoni an der Habtzucht, heard my aunt's intention, he was ill-pleased, and said that I should learn nothing, and he put the first finger of his right hand against the palm of the left and said: "The child is as little able to learn as I am to thrust my finger through here." That I saw and heard. My aunt said, "Ah! who knows? God has not denied him his gifts; he may grow up to be a pious priest."* So she took me to the Herr. I was then about

* As a matter of fact he grew up to be a hot-headed and somewhat bigoted Protestant.

nine or nine and a half years old. There at first things went badly with me, for the Herr was a passionate man, and I a dull peasant-boy. He beat me terribly, and often lifted me by my ears from the ground, so that I cried out like a goat stuck with a knife, till the neighbours kept asking him whether he meant to kill me.

‘With him I did not stay long, for about that time came one who was my cousin, and who was at school at Ulm and Munich in Bavaria. He was a Summermatter, my old grandfather’s son’s son. He was named Paul Summermatter. My friends told him of me, and asked him to take me with him to school in Germany. When I heard about it, I fell on my knees and prayed God the Almighty to help me away from the priest, who taught me absolutely nothing and flogged me mercilessly—for I had only begun to learn how to sing the “Salve” with other scholars in the village who were with the priest. Once when we were going to have a mass ourselves, the other lads sent me into the church for a candle; I thrust it alight into my sleeve and burnt myself so that I still bear the scar.

‘When now Paul was ready to wander forth again, I was to go and join him at Stalden. In Stalden is a house called Zmilibach; there dwelt a man by name Simon zu der Summermatten. He was my mother’s brother and my guardian. He gave me a gold gulden, which I carried in my hand to Stalden (looking at it often on the way to see I had it safe), and gave to Paul. So we started away from the country.’

With the young roving scholar’s doings in foreign parts, exceptionally interesting as they are for the picture they give of the manner of life of those rude outcasts of a bygone day, we have nothing to do here. ‘Schutz’ and ‘Bacchant,’ or, as we should say, fag and fag-master, wandered to Lucerne, Zurich, Nuremberg, Strasburg, Thuringen, Franconia, Poland, Saxony, Breslau, Salzburg, Ulm, and all manner of places, meeting everywhere with strange adventures but not learning much. From time to time young Platter returned home. After one of these visits, he tells us:—‘I went away from the country again with two of my brothers. When we went to bid my mother farewell, she wept and said, “God pity me, who have to see three of my sons go forth to misery.” That was the only time I ever saw my mother weep; for she was a brave, manly woman, but hard. When her third husband died she remained a widow and did all work like a man, so that she might the better bring up her youngest children. She hewed and threshed and did other

work rather belonging to men than women. Three children also she buried with her own hands when they died in a terrible pestilence; for in the pestilence it costs much to employ a gravedigger. She was very hard towards us, her first children; so that we seldom came to her house. At one time, as I remember, I was not with her for five years, but wandered far in foreign parts. When I came to her, the first word she said to me was, "Has the devil brought you here then?" "No, mother," I answered, "the devil has not brought me here, but my feet. I shall not burden you long." "You don't burden me," she said, "only it vexes me that you go thus roving hither and thither, and doubtless are learning nothing. Learn to work as your father did. You will never be a priest. I am not so blessed as to be the mother of a priest." So I stayed two or three days with her. Then I started away with my two brothers; and when we were going over the Lötschenberg towards Gasteren, they sat in a steep place on the snow and slid down the slope. I would also do the same, but, as my legs were not one like the other, the snow twisted me round, so that I slid down head foremost on my back. It had been small wonder if I had fallen with my head against a tree (for there were no rocks in that place) and been killed. The third time I slid straight down on my back, head foremost, and the snow fell in heaps on my face. I thought I could do everything as well as my brothers, but they were better accustomed to the mountains than I.'

Years pass by. Platter ceases somewhat from his wandering life, and settles down as an earnest student at Zürich. He studies the classics with success, becomes a Hebrew scholar, takes some part in the Reformation movement in connexion with Zwingli and his friends, and finally marries the daughter of his teacher, Myconius. For a time he returns to Visp, as schoolmaster and ropemaker—a trade by which he had learnt to support himself during a residence at Basle. Arrived at Visp, where he took a room with fine sash windows 'in almost the best house in the town,' he caused his friends much disappointment, because they had hoped he would be a priest, and now he came amongst them with a wife. His school, however, proved a success. 'In winter,' he says, 'I had about thirty scholars, in summer hardly six. Each gave me every quarter (ember week) a thick penny, so I did well by them, and people made us numerous gifts. I had many aunts; one brought eggs, another a cheese, another a quarter of a sheep, those who lived in the village

gave milk, greens, cans of wine, and the like; so that seldom a day went by but something was given us. Sometimes at night we have reckoned up eight or nine gifts received in the day. When we began to keep house I borrowed from my uncle Antoni Summermatter (otherwise known as Antoni zum Liechtbiell) thirty great "batzen;" on that we began house-keeping. We bought wine, and sold it by measure; bought also apples, and my wife sold them to the children who wanted them. Things now went very well with us; by the help of kind friends we grew above want and my wife was happy there.'

This state of things did not long continue. For reasons concerned with the religious disturbances of the time, Platter judged it expedient to move elsewhere. His journey took him over the Grimsel in rather heavy weather, and, in this connexion, he relates how, on a previous occasion, he had almost been frozen to death on that pass. 'I was journeying alone,' he says, 'and was not at that time experienced about the mountains. Being tired and exhausted, I sat down to rest. There was a strange feeling about my heart, and a pleasing warmth came over me, and I went to sleep with my arms crossed upon my knees. Then came a man to me and laid a hand on each of my shoulders and awakened me, and said, "Eh! why sit you there? Stand up, and go on." Whither the man went I know not, for I looked up and down, far and wide, but saw no one any more. So I stood up, and took out of my wallet a piece of bread and ate it. I was afterwards told by some people who understood about the mountains that I was as good as dead. For if, in a hard frost on the mountains, one sits down from fatigue, he feels warm, because the blood, which before was in the heart, flows from it to the face and limbs, so that he freezes; therefore, if the man sits down, the blood flows from the heart, and the man dies. I can only think, from what they told me, that God preserved me alive. To be frozen, indeed, is the least struggling of deaths, so that sometimes men are found sitting on the mountains as though they were asleep, and they are dead. If, therefore, at any time, people who know of this danger have to spend the night out on the mountains, they hold each other by the hand, and the whole night long, even when it is quite dark, they go round and round in a ring till the light comes again.'

At Basle Platter and his wife, after several further adventures, finally settled down. He at first supported

himself there as a servant, and in other ways. Eventually he became a printer and prospered greatly. Then, at the request of the Town-Council, he became head-master of the Grammar School, a post which he retained till his retirement on a pension after thirty-seven years of service. He had several children, amongst them a son named Felix. The memoirs, from which come the foregoing passages, are addressed to this son. Felix rose to be a medical man of some note in Basle. He also wrote memoirs; but only the following account of a journey he took to the Vispthal in the year 1562 concerns us now. The party consisted of Thomas and Felix Platter and the wife of Felix and her brother.

‘We rode away from Basle past the waterfalls, through Burtolf (Burgdorf) and the Sibenthal. On Saturday, by bad, stony, dangerous ways, we at length reached Sion. The very first night we were entertained by good company, and thirty cans of wine were presented to us. We were all right merry. We stayed at Sion for some days. The Bishop took our horses into his stable, that they might not cost us anything. Captain Marx Wolf hardly ever let us take our meals at the inn, and he gave me and my wife some fine clothes. The canons sent us wine in great goblets made by Exuperantius, a Zurich goldsmith. On Tuesday, June 15th, we went on to Leuggerbad, where there are many inns. My brother-in-law and my wife bargained with the host to pay, each of them, three crowns for lodgings and baths for four weeks.

‘My father wanted to take me to his birthplace, so we left the other two to bathe and returned to Leuk. I was finely clad in red, had a red satin doublet, red breeches, and a velvet hat of uncut velvet. We journeyed up country along the Rhone and came to Visp, which is a pretty little town. We spent the night there, and some Platters, who lived in the town, came to us in the inn and kept us company. Early next morning we went on up the valley, along which the Visp flows, and so we came towards Saas, which is another valley; we however turned up the valley to the right. The path was so narrow that I usually held on to the mountain with one hand whilst on the other a terrible precipice fell away. Then the path began to mount rapidly among larch trees towards the terrible mountains at Grenchen. We came to a beautiful level meadow, near a dreadful pine forest, in which are many bears. Just in front of a house we met an old blind man of a hundred years,

whose children were almost all grown grey. They dwelt together in one house. He said he had well known my father's grandfather, and that in the same tithing there were ten other men as old as he. The house was built of larch-trees set together like a *holderschlag*. My father's aunt, a Platter, cooked us a milk soup. She did not braid her hair but wore it loose. I was very tired, laid myself down awhile on the straw and went to sleep. My father asked after one with whom, years before, he had minded the goats. Hans took us to her house; she was a hideous old hag, and was beating fir-cones. They did not recognise one another. At last she fell on my neck and said "Welcome in God's name, my dear cousin!" as they call any person dear to them. After that we went to Hans in der Bünde's house, and his shrew of a wife said to him, "What! in the devil's name, are you bringing guests?" She gave us some milk, into which pepper was thrown, and we drank good Augstaller wine. After dinner they strewed a bed for us in the room and we lay down. My father said to me, "Do you observe, Felix, how well every one receives me here?" Next morning we went to the house where my father was born. It was nothing but a bit of a house, put together of larch trees, as above described, and was close to a high rock or plateau, from which we Platters are named; and the house, which is no longer occupied, is called the house "an der Platten." After breakfast, to which many came to keep us company and drank deep, we gave a drink on the plateau, and I paid a crown to have my arms* and name carved on the rock there. After the drink, we hurried down the mountain again, for we did not care to stay there any longer. Before Gasen, at Mühlebach, a woman met us whom my father knew. She had two great goitres. It is only in the country below S. Lienhardt that they have goitre, up at Grenchen they do not have it. From Visp we went up country to Brieg. There we met the people going to church. We followed the footpath over a fine meadow, but the people followed the cart-road, which was very filthy. I asked why they did so, and they answered me that the fouler the road the greater the piety of those who went it. On Tuesday we returned to the Baths.'

* Ruden says of the Platters 'Im Wappen führten sie zwei Felder, horizontal getheilt; das obere Feld war roth mit einer weissen Rose, das untere blau und darin rothe Platten' (p. 9, note).