HUMAN NATURE IN THE VALAIS

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(The following article is the substance of an address given by the author to the Alpine Club on May 3, 1955.)

INTELLECTUAL fashions are as unpredictable as fashions in dress. Morgarten was as romantic in the eyes of the eighteenth-century intellectual as Marathon. If Gibbon had been a better German scholar he would have completed his study of the rise of Switzerland rather than written of the Decline of the Roman Empire. ' There is one theme,' he wrote in 1762, ' which I should prefer to all others, the history of the liberty of the Swiss, of that independence which a brave people rescued from the House of Austria, defended against the Dauphin of France, and finally sealed with the blood of Charles of Burgundy.' For Wordsworth and Shelley it was not only Switzerland but the Swiss who were romantic, but when the common people began to invade the country, the intelligentsia transferred their worship to other shrines. ' Mont Blanc at sunset,' wrote Oscar Wilde, ' flushes like a rose with shame perhaps at the prevalence of the tourists.' There are, of course, tourists who would make any self-respecting mountain blush, but it is amusing to note that people who talk like this always regard themselves as exceptions to the general rule that Switzerland has been ruined by the influx of foreigners.

The verdict of the intelligentsia on Switzerland is crystallised in a remark which Graham Greene attributes to one of his characters in *The Third Man.* ' Switzerland has had five centuries of peace and democracy and what have the Swiss produced ? The cuckoo clock ! '

In these five centuries of peace the Swiss defeated Charles of Burgundy, Maximilian of Austria, and Louis XII of France, overran northern Italy and Savoy, and invaded France. During these five centuries of peace the Swiss have averaged some kind of a war, including civil wars, every fifty years. Switzerland only became a democracy in 1848. Until then Switzerland had been a loose confederation of virtually sovereign Cantons, some of which were democratic and some of which were governed by oligarchies. Vaud, for instance, was governed by the Berne patricians. Finally, the cuckoo clock was made not in Switzerland, but in the Black Forest.

During the last war the Swiss Consul in Philadelphia suggested to the Swiss Government that as the Germans could no longer produce cuckoo clocks they should try to capture this market. He received the crushing reply that it was below the dignity of the Swiss to make cuckoo clocks !

There is a speech which is as much a set piece on the Swiss National

Day as the fireworks, the speech in which we are reminded that Switzerland is a mosaic of three races who live together in harmony. Prior to 1939, foreigners who wished to be polite often described Switzerland as the ' true League of Nations,' but nobody would today be so rude as to compare Switzerland to UNO.

The analogy with the defunct League is misleading. It is not because the Swiss are more tolerant than other people, but because their racial minorities share a common frontier with powerful countries who have in the past, and who might in the future, respond to an appeal for liberation. There was no greater France beyond France to inspire a wholesome fear in the Kaiser or in Hitler, both of whom gambled on the neutrality of the British Commonwealth and the U.S.A.

It was indeed the oppression of French-speaking Vaud by Berne, and of the French-speaking Lower Valais by the German-speaking Upper Valais, which provided the armies of Revolutionary France with a pretext for a campaign of ' liberation.' Vaud was liberated from Berne and subjected to Paris. The gold in the Bernese banks was also ' liberated ' and followed the liberated bears from the bear pit on the road to France. The Swiss tolerance of minorities has its roots in the principle, ' Once liberated, twice shy.'

The Swiss deserve to be congratulated on the thoroughness with which they assimilated the truth that tolerance of racial minorities was a condition of national survival and also on the fact that tolerance of racial minorities does not involve any weakening of regional loyalties. *Kantönligeist*, the spirit of the little Canton, is an admirable insurance against the Moloch of the omnicompetent State. The wife of a former Swiss President, himself from Vaud, told me that the two Cantons which gave him most trouble were Protestant Vaud and Catholic Valais, both of which instinctively oppose every new law emanating from the Central Government at Berne. The attitude of the natives of one village to another is often that which was crystallised in a remark made to a Swiss friend of mine by an old guide of Täsch. Of the good folk of Randa, three miles down the valley, he said, ' Dischi Randäer sind e verflüochti, gottlosi cheibu Nation ' (These Randa people are an accursed godless nation).

The relations between the Lower Valais, which is French-speaking, and the Upper Valais, which is German-speaking, have often been as tense as those between France and Germany. Here, as elsewhere, the Germans have been the invaders and the Roman-speaking, and later French-speaking Celts, the invaded. The slow march of the linguistic frontier down the valley registered the advance of the Germans. The son of Herr Blanc of the Hotel Planta in Sion, who had married a German-speaking Valaisian, told me that his small son refused to speak German because his little school friends insisted that German was the language of people who always made war. And these French-speaking schoolboys were not thinking of Bismarck, the Kaiser or Hitler, but of the German tribes who had invaded the Valais across the Grimsel, and thrust the German-speaking frontier ever farther down the valley.

The antagonism between the Lower and Upper Valais indeed resulted in two civil wars in 1840 and in 1846. The racial tensions were further aggravated by political tensions. Mazzini founded in 1835 a secret society, La Jeune Suisse, which he secretly hoped would operate throughout Switzerland, but which was only effective in the Valais, and particularly in the Lower Valais, still dominated and oppressed by the German-speaking Upper Valais. Many Conservatives in the Lower Valais, as a result, joined forces with 8,000 volunteers from the Upper Valais to fight the Liberals after the latter had resorted to violence. The Liberals were routed and their periodical, *L'Echo des Alpes*, was suppressed, only to reappear later as the title of one of the publications of the Swiss Alpine Club.

It was only after the last war that the Canton of Valais was represented in the Swiss Cabinet. Till then the French-speaking and German-speaking Valaisians had never been able to agree on a candidate.

So long as the world flocks to the Swiss mountains in search of romance, the Swiss do not in the least object to being regarded as unromantically virtuous, a reputation which is useful in finance and commerce, and they will probably not thank me for reminding Graham Greene that there are in Switzerland a few oases of lawlessness in the general Sahara of civic virtues. ' It is only a few years ago,' a Valaisian said to me, ' that the Editor of ——— [a Valaisian paper] reported proudly that nobody had been killed in the communal elections on the previous Sunday. In a later edition he had to admit that there had been one fatal casualty, but if you tell this story,' my informant added anxiously, ' don't mention my name or the name of the place.'

The First World War was fought, as we know, ' to make the world safe for democracy.' Our modern problem is to make democracy safe for the world. The Swiss have gone some way to solve this problem. The effective choice in this vale of tears is not, as we know, between a good political system and a bad, but between a bad and a worse, and democracy is probably as innocuous in Switzerland as in any other country which is governed by demos. The Referendum is a valuable protection against any attempt on the part of a Central Government to weaken Cantonal rights or to use the machinery of democracy to transform Switzerland into a Servile State. Moreover, there are mountain valleys which approximate to that form of Government which St. Thomas Aquinas favoured, the ' mixed régime ' in which the King, the Nobles, and the People all enjoyed their respective rights and fulfilled their appropriate duties. There is no King in Zermatt, for instance, but the democracy of Zermatt is still flavoured by oligarchy, a hereditary nobility of Burghers.

Every Swiss citizen can vote in the elections for the Gemeinderat which controls most of the local activities, but in many Gemeinde the grazing rights and the right to a certain quantity of forest wood belong to an oligarchy composed of the descendants of the original Burghers. Alexander Seiler might be the creator of Zermatt as a tourist centre and the generous employer of many of the Zermatt Burghers, but his

application for membership of the proud oligarchy of the Burghers was unhesitatingly rejected in June 1871. The Cantonal Government reminded the Burghers of Article 10 of the Cantonal Constitution according to which any Valaisian (not of course any Swiss) who had been domiciled for five years in a Valaisian Gemeinde had the right to be admitted to the *Burgerschaft* on payment of a sum to be fixed by the Cantonal Government. It was not, however, Article 10 which was decisive in the minds of the Burghers but Seiler's sixteen children, all of whom would have become Burghers with grazing rights had Seiler been admitted. The Burghers therefore appealed in succession to the *Bundesrat* (Cabinet), *Bundesversammlung*, and finally to the Federal Court at Lausanne. Every appeal failed but the Burghers still resisted, and it was not until the Cantonal Government had appointed a Commission to take over the control of the *Burgerschaft* property and quartered on the village six soldiers who loaded their rifles as they approached Zermatt, that the oligarchy at last surrendered. Seiler, the creator of modern Zermatt, became a Burgher on April 7, 1889, eighteen years after he made his first application.

The old guard regarded the Seilers much as a member of one of the old Colonial families of America regards the latest immigrant, and they were determined not to go beyond what the imposed law enforced and to be as difficult as possible on all other occasions. And so when, largely as the result of the initiative of that very able man, Alexander Seiler the Second, the Gornergrat railway was built, the Burghers did all in their power to ensure that the new line should contribute to the prosperity of the Riffelberg hotel, owned by the Burghers, but not to the Riffelalp hotel, owned by the Seilers. When Alexander the Second applied to the *Burgerschaft* to purchase enough land on which to build a little road connecting the Riffelalp hotel with what is now the Riffelalp station, the request was refused, for the Burghers were happy in the knowledge that the line would pass within a hundred yards of their own hotel. But the second round in the campaign was also won by the Seilers. Alexander Seiler applied to the Federal Government for a concession to build a railway to connect Riffelalp station with the Riffelalp hotel. The Federal Government granted him this concession and thus enabled him to acquire the ground which the Burghers refused to sell. And so today the visitor to Riffelalp is met by a little toy electric train in which luggage is conveyed from the station to the hotel. All this is now past history and many of the descendants of the Burghers who bitterly opposed Alexander Seiler's application for *Burgerschaft* are now firm friends and supporters of the Seilers.

It is interesting that the Upper Rhone valley, the Gomstal, which begins at Brig and ends at the Furka, should have been the birthplace not only of Alexander Seiler, the creator of Zermatt, but also of César Ritz. Seiler was born in Blitzingen, a few miles from Niederwald, the birthplace of César Ritz, whom King Edward VII described as 'the King of hoteliers and the hotelier to Kings.' Ritz was born in 1850, began his career as a wine waiter at the famous Hotel des Trois Couronnes

in Brig and was sacked for inefficiency. 'You'll do no good in the hotel business,' was the verdict of the manager. His first real opening came when he worked as a waiter at Voisin's Restaurant during the Paris Exhibition. 'J'eus la chance,' he wrote, 'de devenir l'ami intime d'une charmante baronne russe.' He maintained a discreet silence as to the nature of assistance which he received from this charming Baroness, but the real architect of his fortunes was the Prince of Wales whom he met when he was manager of the Grand Hotel at Cannes.

Ritz was a pioneer in plumbing. Until he opened the Ritz hotel in Paris, the Hotel Bristol had been the last word in luxury. It possessed one bathroom to each floor.

Mühlebach within a few miles of Ritz's birthplace is visited by admirers of Cardinal Schiner, for the modest peasant house in which the only Cardinal born and bred on Swiss soil was born still stands. It is probable that no Swiss has exercised a greater influence on European politics than Cardinal Schiner. He was present at the battle of Marignano in 1515 where the Swiss were defeated. Had they been victorious Switzerland might today be one of the great European powers. But for Schiner, it is certain that the Ticino would today be Italian. I have devoted a chapter to Schiner in my book, *Zermatt and the Valais*, and it would be futile to compress into a few paragraphs a balanced verdict on his mixed character and achievements.

The traveller from Brig to Lausanne can see from the train, somewhere between Visp and Leuk, the church of Raron, a masterpiece of Schiner's architect, U. Ruffiner, superbly poised with its western portal overhanging the majestic cliff which rises from the village of Raron. The great poet Rilke was buried in the churchyard and on the southern wall of the church there is a wooden cross with the initials 'R. M. R.'

Rilke spent his last years in the Valais in a little Château de Musot above Sierre. Among the many ways that mankind can be classified, one of the most illuminating is the distinction between 'helpers' and 'helpees.' Helpers enjoy helping other people, and helpees enjoyed being helped, and the born helpee attracts helpers as irresistibly as honey the bee. Rilke was conscripted at the beginning of the 1914 war and wrote sadly to a friend, 'It is a question of winning an inner resting place.' He was rescued from the barrack square by the Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe and transferred to a department of the Austrian War Office in Vienna, which was suitably adjusted to the needs of poets in search of an 'inner resting place.' After the war the Princess furnished rooms for him in Venice 'with especial feeling and care,' and a little later the Swiss owner of the Château de Musot, William Reinhardt, a born helper, found the helpee appeal of Rilke irresistible and promptly handed over the Château. When helpee meets helpee there is discomfort and frustration, the frustration of talents which can find no expression, but when the born helper meets the born helpee a good time is had by all.

The helper-helpee relationship continued after Rilke's death. Rilke had left the Church and expressly stipulated that no priest should be

allowed near his death-bed, but inconsistently he desired a Catholic funeral. The Army does not give military funerals to deserters nor does the church militant provide Catholic funerals for those who have formally separated themselves from communion. That at least is the theory, but in practice the genial principle 'odia sunt restrigenda, favores autem amplianda '[1] is usually applied. The helper-helpee relationship continued after death and the ecclesiastical authorities accepted without searching examination Reinhardt's assurance that at the very last moment Rilke had asked for a priest. He was accordingly given a Catholic funeral at Raron.

The helper-helpee relationship in the case of Reinhardt and Rilke was symbolic, for there are helper nations no less than helper individuals. The Swiss and the Americans are natural helpers. I am not referring to Lend-Lease, but to the hundreds of thousands of contributions by individuals which crossed the Atlantic for stricken Europe and to the immense contributions by individual Swiss to the sufferers in the two world wars.

On the other hand, in the role of helpee the Swiss are not so good. In 1834 the backward peasants of the Val d'Anniviers actually refused some thousands of francs subscribed by the Swiss to help them defray the immense losses, estimated at 150,000 francs, the result of the flooding of the valley by the sudden melting of the Durand glacier. The peasants thanked the kind donors, but suggested that the money should be given instead to ' such unfortunates as did not know how to help themselves.' In 1880 much property was destroyed in Vissoie by a fire and once again the Anniviards refused all financial assistance, excepting 800 francs voted to them by the Cantonal authorities. In recent years the outlook has changed for the better, but these reactionary peasants still believe in self-help and much educational work will be needed before the Anniviards are ready for the Welfare State.

Few mountaineers, I fear, stop in Sion, the next station below Sierre. Christianity was firmly established in Sion by 377 to judge by the Christian monogram on an inscription which you can still see in the Hotel de Ville.

Saxon, between Sion and Martigny, was developing into a Swiss rival of Monte Carlo when the Swiss Government decided to forbid roulette on Swiss territory. The old Grand Hotel has long been broken up and the Kurpark, where fashionable visitors consoled each other for their gaming losses, is now the playground of hens. Saxon now supplies the principal hotels in the great towns with fruit, the principal industry of the region. Unfortunately, Italian fruit ripens a week or two before Valaisian fruit and in 1953 some truckloads of Italian fruit which were passing through Saxon were attacked by the fruit growers of Saxon and burnt. The Federal Government, confronted with demands for compensation from the outraged Italians, were not very pleased, perhaps because they foresaw a certain difficulty in collecting the compensation

[1] That is, sanctions are to be interpreted in the most restricted and concessions in the most generous sense.

from Saxon, and it would seem that the members of the Swiss Nationalrat were not greatly mollified when they encountered on the steps of the Bundeshaus representatives of the Saxon fruit growers who had prepared for each legislator a nice little basket of Saxon fruit. The Italians should have sent a delegation to give the Swiss little toy trains, models of those burnt at Saxon.

The title of this paper may suggest that I am claiming an expert knowledge of human nature in the Valais. I am making no such claim. Some sixty years of contact with the Swiss has taught me how difficult it is to penetrate the granite curtain which separates the man of the plains from the man of the mountains. Their relations may be cordial but can hardly be intimate. I have not forgotten J. P. Farrar's tribute to his guide who had crossed his last pass, but though among the rewards of mountaineering few rank higher than ' the feeling of more than ordinary friendship that binds one to a man whom one has learned to know and to judge in that school of stern, though voluntary, discipline and not infrequent danger that is of the essence of serious mountaineering,' Guide and Herr will talk over the camp fire of the things they both understand, and not of the issues, often acrimonious, which are the stuff of local politics.

My own sources of information for the inner life of a mountain village have almost always been the Swiss of town or plains who had settled in mountain valleys long enough to become the confidant of the Berglers. It was such a Swiss who told me a village legend in which famous mountaineering names were linked (guide and lady amateur), a story which, whether true or false, was believed by the whole village but never disclosed, so I am told, till that day to any member of the A.C. An even more striking example of this mountain reserve was the case of the Taugwalders. I am confident that no members of our club were allowed to suspect how deep was the resentment provoked by Whymper's attack on the Taugwalders in *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*. Had Coolidge known what I now know he would have been delighted to tell me, for there was no fact discreditable to Whymper, known to Coolidge, which was not in due course passed on to me. His marginalia on the Scrambles were not confined to his famous attack on the authenticity of the Ecrins jump. ' Do you know ? ' he once asked me, ' why Whymper and Croz separated from Moore after the Ecrins climb, and spent a night lower down ? Moore was a great swell and Whymper was not a gentleman and Moore did not like him. He could only tolerate him on the mountain and once the climb was over I expect Moore's unmistakable sentiments were only too clear and Whymper was more comfortable without him.' And his malicious little beard wagged delightedly. If in default of facts he could evolve such a story out of fancy, it is easy to imagine what he could and would have made of the valley's attitude to Whymper had he known it. ' Er war nicht beliebt in Tal ' (He was not liked in the valley) was Joseph Knubel's verdict, but he did not volunteer this remark. Indeed he did not make it until my article appeared in the ALPINE JOURNAL in which I analysed Whymper's

attacks on the Taugwalders and did my best to show that they were without valid justification. ' You were the first,' said Otto Furrer, ' to defend the Taugwalders against an unfair attack.' Not the first, but Leslie Stephen's article in *Macmillan's* never reached the valley. And the men of the valley never raised the question with their various mountaineering patrons. Martin Conway, for instance, who loved Alpine gossip and who was particularly interested in Whymper, whose complex character he often discussed with me, clearly knew nothing of Zermatt sentiment on this point.

Nearly ninety years after the Matterhorn had been climbed a monument was erected in the Zermatt graveyard to the Taugwalders. There was no public ceremony. ' Wir wollten kein polemic ' (We did not want any controversy) a Zermatt priest said to me, ' we just wanted to make it clear what our opinion was about the Taugwalders.' And this opinion, the verdict of all who knew them you may read on the monument.

Berufstreue . . . Kein polemic. . . . One simple adjective which sums up all that needed to be said about two guides who had done their duty to the best of their ability.

The true Bergler in his relations with the mountaineering and ski-ing migrants into his valley is as reserved in expressing his likes as his dislikes. Nothing truer was ever said of the Swiss than Ruskin's words, ' They use no phrases of friendship but they do not fail you in your need.' As indeed hundreds of thousands of war victims in this and the previous world war have good cause to know.

From July 3–10 Zermatt will celebrate the Monte Rosa week, this being the centenary of the first ascent of Monte Rosa by a party of British amateurs and Swiss guides. Much has changed in the century that has passed since Monte Rosa was climbed and organised mountaineering began, but neither wars nor revolutions have weakened—on the contrary they have reinforced—the friendship between those who have the good fortune to live in the mountain valleys of Switzerland and those whose countrymen played so important a role in the development of mountaineering and ski-ing.