

LONDON TO ZERMATT, 1946.

CLIVE BRAMFITT.

When we came home both of us had lost about half-a-stone in weight and a small fortune in francs, but we had become rich in experience and Castor was in the bag. First, however . . .

For the benefit of the uninitiated, all Alpine holidays start from Victoria, that most cosmopolitan of stations. It announces in fascinating letters "Direct Routes to Paris, Calais, Ostend And The Continent of Europe." After absorbing this and resisting the temptation to "lean superciliously on an ice-axe" (like Smythe's Mountaineers) and watch hordes of tourists being herded about by gorgeously-clad officials of Thos. Cook Ltd., the party claimed its seats. From London to Zermatt, by the way, costs £12 10s. third class, the route lying through Dover, Calais and Basle. If you want the additional thrill—and expense—of boarding the famous "Golden Arrow" then you have to go through Paris and Lausanne.

At Dover Maritime a wonderful atmosphere of calm prevailed in spite of the efforts of a thousand trippers determined not to be last on the boat. Smoothly and efficiently one is scrutinised, stamped, inspected and turned loose on to the S.S. *Canterbury*. At Calais the scene is changed. One is on the Continent. The boat is boarded by swarms of uniformed and numbered *porteurs* lusting after ten francs. Beware of these *porteurs*. The unfortunate victims either lose both the *porteur* and the luggage or see their bags dropped overboard to be rescued by more *porteurs*—more francs. Getting through the Customs was largely a question of the survival of the fittest. There was no attempt to organise the mob. After being herded, shoved, and sworn at in rapid French, one concludes that crampons are best worn on the outside of the pack with the points out, and the ice-axe at the "ready." We also advise against trying to get through with the extra "wad." One Englishman and his wife were suspected, searched, and relieved of £5 each. Afterwards they remarked to the scandalised crowd, "And *this* from an Ally!"

On the train the theme—with little variation—was as per Customs Shed. French trains are rather peculiar but they have their points. There are three classes; the first luxurious, the third mere tins on wheels. We entered the tins. Being equal in proportion, when the firsts are full the thirds have long since passed saturation point. The journey from Calais to

Basle takes 17 hours, and the temperature rises in direct ratio to the density of the train's population as we roll south. Cattle-trains passed us with their occupants in perfect comfort . . . Definitely not the sort of journey one wishes to repeat.

One often wonders how French trains stay on the rails. Our train dashed across the points at top speed, braked down in some fifty yards, and started up apparently in top gear. We also invariably left the station the same way as we went in, but this did not seem to worry the French very much.

For over 400 miles the train rolls through wrecked railway stations and shattered towns; but the countryside is rich in corn. They use the open field system here, and one sees great areas of yellow wheat, a wonderful sight. Occasionally we saw a binder at work in the distance, but usually there was a little group of sunburnt men, women and children, cutting away with scythe and sickle at the seemingly impossible task of getting it all in.

Lille is passed; Valenciennes, Charleville, Sedan, Montmédy, Thionville; and so into Metz in the early hours of the morning. By this time we were using a rudimentary pidgin English with the ignorant Frenchmen. We produced chocolates and—a luxury in France—cigarettes; they produced grapes. Thus the Entente Cordiale continued. It required considerable nerve to use one's limited French with the genuine article. There are memories of one member of the party, unnerved at repeated requests for a cigarette, doing a charade and reiterating "Me no smoke . . ."

Strasbourg was reached in the grey light of dawn, just as one was beginning to appreciate Wordsworth's line: "Suffering is long obscure and has the nature of infinity." One more stop at Mulhouse and the end was in sight. Suddenly we crossed the border. There were no signposts to tell us—just the abrupt change from the dingy red brick of the French houses to the dazzling white and vivid colours of the Swiss ones. Soon we were in Basle, the ancient town on the Rhine where three countries meet. Once more into the Customs breach (nothing mattered now) and we were in the promised land.

There was a delightful atmosphere of warmth and colour as we sat down to breakfast that morning. A station wagon loaded with peaches, pears, grapes and bananas passed before our dazzled eyes. (A word of warning here: Alpine climbing and peach-laden interiors do not agree; a pity, but we have painful

evidence on that point.) After a luxurious wash the party wandered through the wide, clean, brightly-coloured streets of Basle. As we had expected, we could have bought anything—at a price—from £10 watches down to those magnificent doughnuts at 4d. each. We strongly recommend the Swiss doughnut. It has soul. Later in the morning we boarded the train for Zermatt. These trains are the last word in rail travel. They rush you along at an average of some 50 m.p.h., and being all-electric afford the joys of open-window travelling without the usual consequences.

To an eye used to the drabness of English towns and (often) villages, Switzerland is a fairy tale. The picturesque chalet is built in a lovely style in the most dazzling colours; white walls and red and green roofs; shutters of almost any colour, and flowers in every window-sill. Even the gates at the level crossings were tastefully painted, and no matter how bright the colours, they were never garish, being in harmony with the natural brilliance of earth and sky. "Superficial," snorts the envious traveller who prefers "the sincerity of Birmingham." Heaven knows why we cannot live in the same conditions of cleanliness without calling it vulgar. Priestley explains the English paradox of culture in the midst of ugliness by saying we have "too much imagination and not enough common sense."

The train rushes on through a warm and lovely land. Berne, the capital, is soon reached from Basle. A city on a hill, a city of old and new surrounded by a river of clear green and capped by its noble Parliament House of green stone; one would not be surprised to see Ogres in Berne, and Giants with seven-league boots. Cobbled streets with galleries wind away from its broad clean thoroughfares, each with its fresh-water fountain and the inevitable flowers—always flowers. On the bridges one can look down on to the red roofs of the watchmakers' houses, with their wooden stairs and galleries beneath; and, away on the horizon, see the snow-clad mountains of the Oberland. The train dashes towards them, stops at Thun with its red and green roofs beside a lake of deep blue, and on, right into the heart of the mountain mass. It races up mountain walls, swings round corners, over dizzy heights, and dashes downhill into the sunshine of gaily-coloured Kandersteg.

Swiss stations were always an event. That day, 1st August, was the Swiss National Day, and flag-sellers were out in their national dress. The girls were lovely. The station-master is a gorgeous personage in gold braid and is very important. It

is he who starts the train with a green-and-white disc—red is far too common a colour—whilst an underling clangs a bell. You feel that your arrival and departure is the event of the day for everyone.

From Kandersteg the line goes through a long tunnel at a considerable height and then down the valley into Brigue, an ancient town and stifling hot. The last lap from Brigue to Zermatt is 26 miles, and one chugs up to 5,500 feet on a rack-and-pinion railway. Parts of this route are quite hair-raising.

The train crawls up beside a raging glacier-torrent, beneath hanging glaciers, across the quiet pastures of the valley-floors. Here are lonely villages set high on the mountainside; clusters of brown pinewood chalets, each with its church and its bell. At last after some thirty-six hours of travelling, we reach Zermatt; and at least one dream is realised.

That night the party camped in the middle of a quiet Alpine pasture in full view of the moonlit Matterhorn.

*Under high cliffs and far from the huge town
I sit me down.*

For want of me the world's course will not fail:

When all its work is done, the lie shall rot;

The truth is great, and shall prevail

When none care whether it prevail or not.

—COVENTRY PATMORE.