The Return Journey

When one walks, one must travel west or south. If one turns northward or eastward it is like walking down a cul-de-sac, to the blind end.

So it has been since the Crusaders came home satiated, and the Renaissance saw the western sky as an archway into the future. So it is still. We must go westwards and southwards.

It is a sad and gloomy thing to travel even from Italy into France. But it is a joyful thing to walk south to Italy, south and west. It is so. And there is a certain exaltation in the thought of going west, even to Cornwall, to Ireland. It is as if the magnetic poles were south-west and north-east, for our spirits, with the south-west, under the sunset, as the positive pole. So whilst I walk through Switzerland, though it is a valley of gloom and depression, a light seems to flash out under every footstep, with the joy of progression.

It was Sunday morning when I left the valley where the Italians lived. I went quickly over the stream, heading for Lucerne. It was a good thing to be out of doors, with one's pack on one's back, climbing uphill. But the trees were thick by the roadside; I was not yet free. It was Sunday morning, very still.

In two hours I was at the top of the hill, looking out over the

intervening valley at the long lake of Zurich, spread there beyond with its girdle of low hills, like a relief-map. I could not bear to look at it, it was so small and unreal. I had a feeling as if it were false, a large relief-map that I was looking down upon, and which I wanted to smash. It seemed to intervene between me and some reality. I could not believe that that was the real world. It was a figment, a fabrication, like a dull landscape painted on a wall, to hide the real landscape.

So I went on, over to the other side of the hill, and I looked out again. Again there were the smoky-looking hills and the lake like a piece of looking-glass. But the hills were higher: that big one was the Rigi. I set off down the hill.

There was fat agricultural land and several villages. And church was over. The churchgoers were all coming home: men in black broadcloth and old chimney-pot silk hats, carrying their umbrellas; women in ugly dresses, carrying books and umbrellas. The streets were dotted with these black-clothed men and stiff women, all reduced to a Sunday nullity. I hated it. It reminded me of that which I knew in my boyhood, that stiff, null 'propriety' which used to come over us, like a sort of deliberate and self-inflicted cramp, on Sundays. I hated these elders in black broadcloth, with their neutral faces, going home piously to their Sunday dinners. I hated the feeling of these villages, comfortable, well-to-do, clean, and proper.

And my boot was chafing two of my toes. That always happens. I had come

down to a wide, shallow valley-bed, marshy. So about a mile out of the village I sat down by a stone bridge, by a stream, and tore up my handkerchief, and bound up the toes. And as I sat binding my toes, two of the elders in black, with umbrellas under their arms, approached from the direction of the village.

They made me so furious, I had to hasten to fasten my boot, to hurry on again, before they should come near me. I could not bear the way they walked and talked, so crambling and material and mealy-mouthed.

Then it did actually begin to rain. I was just going down a short hill. So I sat under a bush and watched the trees drip. I was so glad to be there, homeless, without place or belonging, crouching under the leaves in the copse by the road, that I felt I had, like the meek, inherited the earth. Some men went by, with their coat-collars turned up, and the rain making still blacker their black broadcloth shoulders. They did not see me. I was as safe and separate as a ghost. So I ate the remains of my food that I had bought in Zurich, and waited for the rain.

Later, in the wet Sunday afternoon, I went on to the little lake, past many inert, neutral, material people, down an ugly road where trams ran. The blight of Sunday was almost intolerable near the town.

So on I went, by the side of the steamy, reedy lake, walking the length of it. Then suddenly I went in to a little villa by the water for tea. In Switzerland every house is a villa.

But this villa, was kept by two old ladies and a delicate dog, who must not get his feet wet. I was very happy there. I had good jam and strange honey-cakes for tea, that I liked, and the little old ladies pattered round in a great stir, always whirling like two dry leaves after the restless dog.

'Why must he not go out?' I said.

'Because it is wet,' they answered, 'and he coughs and sneezes.'

'Without a handkerchief, that is not angenehm' I said.

So we became bosom friends.

'You are Austrian?' they said to me.

I said I was from Graz; that my father was a doctor in Graz, and that I was walking for my pleasure through the countries of Europe.

I said this because I knew a doctor from Graz who was always wandering about, and because I did not want to be myself, an Englishman, to these two old ladies. I wanted to be something else. So we exchanged confidences.

They told me, in their queer, old, toothless fashion, about their

visitors, a man who used to fish all day, every day for three weeks, fish every hour of the day, though many a day he caught nothing--nothing at all--still he fished from the boat; and so on, such trivialities. Then they told me of a third sister who had died, a third little old lady. One could feel the gap in the house. They cried; and I, being an Austrian from Graz, to my astonishment felt my tears slip over on to the table. I also was sorry, and I would have kissed the little old ladies to comfort them.

'Only in heaven it is warm, and it doesn't rain, and no one dies,' I said, looking at the wet leaves.

Then I went away. I would have stayed the night at this house: I wanted to. But I had developed my Austrian character too far.

So I went on to a detestable brutal inn in the town. And the next day I climbed over the back of the detestable Rigi, with its vile hotel, to come to Lucerne. There, on the Rigi, I met a lost young Frenchman who could speak no German, and who said he could not find people to speak French. So we sat on a stone and became close friends, and I promised faithfully to go and visit him in his barracks in Algiers: I was to sail from Naples to Algiers. He wrote me the address on his card, and told me he had friends in the regiment, to whom I should be introduced, and we could have a good time, if I would stay a week or two, down there in Algiers.

How much more real Algiers was than the rock on the Rigi where we sat, or the lake beneath, or the mountains beyond. Algiers is very real, though I have never seen it, and my friend is my friend for ever, though I have lost his card and forgotten his name. He was a Government clerk from Lyons, making this his first foreign tour before he began his military service. He showed me his 'circular excursion ticket'. Then at last we parted, for he must get to the top of the Rigi, and I must get to the bottom.

Lucerne and its lake were as irritating as ever--like the wrapper round milk chocolate. I could not sleep even one night there: I took the steamer down the lake, to the very last station. There I found a good German inn, and was happy.

There was a tall thin young man, whose face was red and inflamed from the sun. I thought he was a German tourist. He had just come in; and he was eating bread and milk. He and I were alone in the eating-room. He was looking at an illustrated paper.

'Does the steamer stop here all night?' I asked him in German, hearing the boat bustling and blowing her steam on the water outside, and glancing round at her lights, red and white, in the pitch darkness.

He only shook his head over his bread and milk, and did not lift his face.

'Are you English, then?' I said.

No one but an Englishman would have hidden his face in a bowl of milk, and have shaken his red ears in such painful confusion.

'Yes,' he said, 'I am.'

And I started almost out of my skin at the unexpected London accent. It was as if one suddenly found oneself in the Tube.

'So am I,' I said. 'Where have you come from?'

Then he began, like a general explaining his plans, to tell me. He had walked round over the Furka Pass, had been on foot four or five days. He had walked tremendously. Knowing no German, and nothing of the mountains, he had set off alone on this tour: he had a fortnight's holiday. So he had come over the Rhône Glacier across the Furka and down from Andermatt to the Lake. On this last day he had walked about thirty mountain miles.

'But weren't you tired?' I said, aghast.

He was. Under the inflamed redness of his sun- and wind- and snow-burned face he was sick with fatigue. He had done over a hundred miles in the last four days.

'Did you enjoy it?' I asked.

'Oh yes. I wanted to do it all.' He wanted to do it, and he had done it. But God knows what he wanted to do it for. He had now one day at Lucerne, one day at Interlaken and Berne, then London.

I was sorry for him in my soul, he was so cruelly tired, so perishingly victorious.

'Why did you do so much?' I said. 'Why did you come on foot all down the valley when you could have taken the train? Was it worth it?'

'I think so,' he said.

Yet he was sick with fatigue and over-exhaustion. His eyes were quite dark, sightless: he seemed to have lost the power of seeing, to be virtually blind. He hung his head forward when he had to write a post card, as if he felt his way. But he turned his post card so that I should not see to whom it was addressed; not that I was interested; only I noticed his little, cautious, English movement of privacy.

'What time will you be going on?' I asked.

'When is the first steamer?' he said, and he turned out a guide-book with a time-table. He would leave at about seven.

'But why so early?' I said to him.

He must be in Lucerne at a certain hour, and at Interlaken in the evening.

'I suppose you will rest when you get to London?' I said.

He looked at me quickly, reservedly.

I was drinking beer: I asked him wouldn't he have something. He thought a moment, then said he would have another glass of hot milk. The landlord came--'And bread?' he asked.

The Englishman refused. He could not eat, really. Also he was poor; he had to husband his money. The landlord brought the milk and asked me, when would the gentleman want to go away. So I made arrangements between the landlord and the stranger. But the Englishman was slightly uncomfortable at my intervention. He did not like me to know what he would have for breakfast.

I could feel so well the machine that had him in its grip. He slaved for a year, mechanically, in London, riding in the Tube, working in the office. Then for a fortnight he was let free. So he rushed to Switzerland, with a tour planned out, and with just enough money to see him through, and to buy presents at Interlaken: bits of the edelweiss pottery: I could see him going home with them.

So he arrived, and with amazing, pathetic courage set forth on foot in a strange land, to face strange landlords, with no language but English at his command, and his purse definitely limited. Yet he wanted to go among the mountains, to cross a glacier. So he had walked on and on, like one possessed, ever forward. His name might have been Excelsior, indeed.

But then, when he reached his Furka, only to walk along the ridge and to descend on the same side! My God, it was killing to the soul. And here he was, down again from the mountains, beginning his journey home again: steamer and train and steamer and train and Tube, till he was back in the machine.

It hadn't let him go, and he knew it. Hence his cruel self-torture of fatigue, his cruel exercise of courage. He who hung his head in his milk in torment when I asked him a question in German, what courage had he not needed to take this his very first trip out of England, alone, on foot!

His eyes were dark and deep with unfathomable courage. Yet he was going back in the morning. He was going back. All he had courage for was to go back. He would go back, though he died by inches. Why not? It was killing him, it was like living loaded with irons. But he had the courage to submit, to die that way, since it was the way allotted to him.

The way he sank on the table in exhaustion, drinking his milk, his will, nevertheless, so perfect and unblemished, triumphant, though his body was broken and in anguish, was almost too much to bear. My heart was wrung for my countryman, wrung till it bled.

I could not bear to understand my countryman, a man who worked for his living, as I had worked, as nearly all my countrymen work. He would not give in. On his holiday he would walk, to fulfil his purpose, walk on; no matter how cruel the effort were, he would not rest, he would not relinquish his purpose nor abate his will, not by one jot or tittle. His body must pay whatever his will demanded, though it were torture.

It all seemed to me so foolish. I was almost in tears. He went to bed. I walked by the dark lake, and talked to the girl in the inn. She was a pleasant girl: it was a pleasant inn, a homely place. One could be happy there.

In the morning it was sunny, the lake was blue. By night I should be nearly at the crest of my journey. I was glad.

The Englishman had gone. I looked for his name in the book. It was written in a fair, clerkly hand. He lived at Streatham. Suddenly I hated him. The dogged fool, to keep his nose on the grindstone like that. What was all his courage but the very tip-top of cowardice? What a vile nature--almost Sadish, proud, like the infamous Red Indians, of being able to stand torture.

The landlord came to talk to me. He was fat and comfortable and too respectful. But I had to tell him all the Englishman had done, in the way of a holiday, just to shame his own fat, ponderous, inn-keeper's luxuriousness that was too gross. Then all I got out of his enormous comfortableness was:

'Yes, that's a very long step to take.'

So I set off myself, up the valley between the close, snow-topped mountains, whose white gleamed above me as I crawled, small as an insect, along the dark, cold valley below.

There had been a cattle fair earlier in the morning, so troops of cattle were roving down the road, some with bells tang-tanging, all with soft faces and startled eyes and a sudden swerving of horns. The grass was very green by the roads and by the streams; the shadows of the mountain slopes were very dark on either hand overhead, and the sky with snowy flanks and tips was high up.

Here, away from the world, the villages were quiet and obscure--left behind. They had the same fascinating atmosphere of being forgotten, left out of the world, that old English villages have. And buying apples and cheese and bread in a little shop that sold everything and smelled of everything, I felt at home again.

But climbing gradually higher, mile after mile, always between the shadows of the high mountains, I was glad I did not live in the Alps. The villages on the slopes, the people there, seemed, as if they must gradually, bit by bit, slide down and tumble to the water-course, and be rolled on away, away to the sea. Straggling, haphazard little villages ledged on the slope, high up, beside their wet, green, hanging meadows, with pine trees behind and the valley bottom far below, and rocks right above, on both sides, seemed like little temporary squattings of outcast people. It seemed impossible that they should persist there, with great shadows wielded over them, like a menace, and gleams of brief sunshine, like a window. There was a sense of momentariness and expectation. It seemed as though some dramatic upheaval must take place, the mountains fall down into their own shadows. The valley beds were like deep graves, the sides of the mountains like the collapsing walls of a grave. The very mountain-tops above, bright with transcendent snow, seemed like death, eternal death.

There, it seemed, in the glamorous snow, was the source of death, which fell down in great waves of shadow and rock, rushing to the level earth. And all the people of the mountains, on the slopes, in the valleys, seemed to live upon this great, rushing wave of death, of breaking-down, of destruction.

The very pure source of breaking-down, decomposition, the very quick of cold death, is the snowy mountain-peak above. There, eternally, goes on the white foregathering of the crystals, out of the deathly cold of the

heavens; this is the static nucleus where death meets life in its elementality. And thence, from their white, radiant nucleus of death in life, flows the great flux downwards, towards life and warmth. And we below, we cannot think of the flux upwards, that flows from the needle-point of snow to the unutterable cold and death.

The people under the mountains, they seem to live in the flux of death, the last, strange, overshadowed units of life. Big shadows wave over them, there is the eternal noise of water falling icily downwards from the source of death overhead.

And the people under the shadows, dwelling in the tang of snow and the noise of icy water, seem dark, almost sordid, brutal. There is no flowering or coming to flower, only this persistence, in the ice-touched air, of reproductive life.

But it is difficult to get a sense of a native population. Everywhere are the hotels and the foreigners, the parasitism. Yet there is, unseen, this overshadowed, overhung, sordid mountain population, ledged on the slopes and in the crevices. In the wider valleys there is still a sense of cowering among the people. But they catch a new tone from their contact with the foreigners. And in the towns are nothing but tradespeople.

So I climbed slowly up, for a whole day, first along the highroad, sometimes above and sometimes below the twisting, serpentine railway,

then afterwards along a path on the side of the hill--a path that went through the crew-yards of isolated farms and even through the garden of a village priest. The priest was decorating an archway. He stood on a chair in the sunshine, reaching up with a garland, whilst the serving-woman stood below, talking loudly.

The valley here seemed wider, the great flanks of the mountains gave place, the peaks above were further back. So one was happier. I was pleased as I sat by the thin track of single flat stones that dropped swiftly downhill.

At the bottom was a little town with a factory or quarry, or a foundry, some place with long, smoking chimneys; which made me feel quite at home among the mountains.

It is the hideous rawness of the world of men, the horrible, desolating harshness of the advance of the industrial world upon the world of nature, that is so painful. It looks as though the industrial spread of mankind were a sort of dry disintegration advancing and advancing, a process of dry disintegration. If only we could learn to take thought for the whole world instead of for merely tiny bits of it.

I went through the little, hideous, crude factory-settlement in the high valley, where the eternal snows gleamed, past the enormous advertisements for chocolate and hotels, up the last steep slope of the pass to where the tunnel begins. Göschenen, the village at the mouth of

the tunnel, is all railway sidings and haphazard villas for tourists, post cards, and touts and weedy carriages; disorder and sterile chaos, high up. How should any one stay there!

I went on up the pass itself. There were various parties of visitors on the roads and tracks, people from towns incongruously walking and driving. It was drawing on to evening. I climbed slowly, between the great cleft in the rock where are the big iron gates, through which the road winds, winds half-way down the narrow gulley of solid, living rock, the very throat of the path, where hangs a tablet in memory of many Russians killed.

Emerging through the dark rocky throat of the pass I came to the upper world, the level upper world. It was evening, livid, cold. On either side spread the sort of moorland of the wide pass-head. I drew near along the high-road, to Andermatt.

Everywhere were soldiers moving about the livid, desolate waste of this upper world. I passed the barracks and the first villas for visitors. Darkness was coming on; the straggling, inconclusive street of Andermatt looked as if it were some accident--houses, hotels, barracks, lodging-places tumbled at random as the caravan of civilization crossed this high, cold, arid bridge of the European world.

I bought two post cards and wrote them out of doors in the cold, livid twilight. Then I asked a soldier where was the post-office. He directed

me. It was something like sending post cards from Skegness or Bognor, there in the post-office.

I was trying to make myself agree to stay in Andermatt for the night. But I could not. The whole place was so terribly raw and flat and accidental, as if great pieces of furniture had tumbled out of a pantechnicon and lay discarded by the road. I hovered in the street, in the twilight, trying to make myself stay. I looked at the announcements of lodgings and boarding for visitors. It was no good. I could not go into one of these houses.

So I passed on, through the old, low, broad-eaved houses that cringe down to the very street, out into the open again. The air was fierce and savage. On one side was a moorland, level; on the other a sweep of naked hill, curved concave, and sprinkled with snow. I could see how wonderful it would all be, under five or six feet of winter snow, skiing and tobogganing at Christmas. But it needed the snow. In the summer there is to be seen nothing but the winter's broken detritus.

The twilight deepened, though there was still the strange, glassy translucency of the snow-lit air. A fragment of moon was in the sky. A carriage-load of French tourists passed me. There was the loud noise of water, as ever, something eternal and maddening in its sound, like the sound of Time itself, rustling and rushing and wavering, but never for a second ceasing. The rushing of Time that continues throughout eternity, this is the sound of the icy streams of Switzerland, something that

mocks and destroys our warm being.

So I came, in the early darkness, to the little village with the broken castle that stands for ever frozen at the point where the track parts, one way continuing along the ridge, to the Furka Pass, the other swerving over the hill to the left, over the Gotthardt.

In this village I must stay. I saw a woman looking hastily, furtively from a doorway. I knew she was looking for visitors. I went on up the hilly street. There were only a few wooden houses and a gaily lighted wooden inn, where men were laughing, and strangers, men, standing talking loudly in the doorway.

It was very difficult to go to a house this night. I did not want to approach any of them. I turned back to the house of the peering woman. She had looked hen-like and anxious. She would be glad of a visitor to help her pay her rent.

It was a clean, pleasant wooden house, made to keep out the cold. That seemed its one function: to defend the inmates from the cold. It was furnished like a hut, just tables and chairs and bare wooden walls. One felt very close and secure in the room, as in a hut, shut away from the outer world.

The hen-like woman came.

'Can I have a bed,' I said, 'for the night?'

'Abendessen, ja!' she replied. 'Will you have soup and boiled beef and vegetables?'

I said I would, so I sat down to wait, in the utter silence. I could scarcely hear the ice-stream, the silence seemed frozen, the house empty. The woman seemed to be flitting aimlessly, scurriedly, in reflex against the silence. One could almost touch the stillness as one could touch the walls, or the stove, or the table with white American oil-cloth.

Suddenly she appeared again.

'What will you drink?'

She watched my face anxiously, and her voice was pathetic, slightly pleading in its quickness.

'Wine or beer?' she said.

I would not trust the coldness of beer.

'A half of red wine,' I said.

I knew she was going to keep me an indefinite time.

She appeared with the wine and bread.

'Would you like omelette after the beef?' she asked. 'Omelette with cognac--I can make it very good.'

I knew I should be spending too much, but I said yes. After all, why should I not eat, after the long walk?

So she left me again, whilst I sat in the utter isolation and stillness, eating bread and drinking the wine, which was good. And I listened for any sound: only the faint noise of the stream. And I wondered, Why am I here, on this ridge of the Alps, in the lamp-lit, wooden, close-shut room, alone? Why am I here?

Yet somehow I was glad, I was happy even: such splendid silence and coldness and clean isolation. It was something eternal, unbroachable: I was free, in this heavy, ice-cold air, this upper world, alone. London, far away below, beyond, England, Germany, France--they were all so unreal in the night. It was a sort of grief that this continent all beneath was so unreal, false, non-existent in its activity. Out of the silence one looked down on it, and it seemed to have lost all importance, all significance. It was so big, yet it had no significance. The kingdom of the world had no significance: what could one do but wander about?

The woman came with my soup. I asked her, did not many people come in the summer. But she was scared away, she did not answer, she went like a leaf in the wind. However, the soup was good and plentiful.

She was a long time before she came with the next course. Then she put the tray on the table, and looking at me, then looking away, shrinking, she said:

'You must excuse me if I don't answer you--I don't hear well--I am rather deaf.'

I looked at her, and I winced also. She shrank in such simple pain from the fact of her defect. I wondered if she were bullied because of it, or only afraid lest visitors would dislike it.

She put the dishes in order, set me my plate, quickly, nervously, and was gone again, like a scared chicken. Being tired, I wanted to weep over her, the nervous, timid hen, so frightened by her own deafness. The house was silent of her, empty. It was perhaps her deafness which created this empty soundlessness.

When she came with the omelette, I said to her loudly:

'That was very good, the soup and meat.' So she quivered nervously, and said, 'Thank you,' and I managed to talk to her. She was like most deaf people, in that her terror of not hearing made her six times worse than

she actually was.

She spoke with a soft, strange accent, so I thought she was perhaps a foreigner. But when I asked her she misunderstood, and I had not the heart to correct her. I can only remember she said her house was always full in the winter, about Christmas-time. People came for the winter sport. There were two young English ladies who always came to her.

She spoke of them warmly. Then, suddenly afraid, she drifted off again. I ate the omelette with cognac, which was very good, then I looked in the street. It was very dark, with bright stars, and smelled of snow. Two village men went by. I was tired, I did not want to go to the inn.

So I went to bed, in the silent, wooden house. I had a small bedroom, clean and wooden and very cold. Outside, the stream was rushing. I covered myself with a great depth of featherbed, and looked at the stars, and the shadowy upper world, and went to sleep.

In the morning I washed in the ice-cold water, and was glad to set out. An icy mist was over the noisy stream, there were a few meagre, shredded pine-trees. I had breakfast and paid my bill: it was seven francs--more than I could afford; but that did not matter, once I was out in the air.

The sky was blue and perfect, it was a ringing morning, the village was very still. I went up the hill till I came to the signpost. I looked down the direction of the Furka, and thought of my tired Englishman from

Streatham, who would be on his way home. Thank God I need not go home: never, perhaps. I turned up the track to the left, to the Gothard.

Standing looking round at the mountain-tops, at the village and the broken castle below me, at the scattered debris of Andermatt on the moor in the distance, I was jumping in my soul with delight. Should one ever go down to the lower world?

Then I saw another figure striding along, a youth with knee-breeches and Alpine hat and braces over his shirt, walking manfully, his coat slung in his rucksack behind. I laughed, and waited. He came my way.

'Are you going over the Gothard?' I said.

'Yes,' he replied. 'Are you also?'

'Yes' I said. 'We will go together.'

So we set off, climbing a track up the heathy rocks.

He was a pale, freckled town youth from Basel, seventeen years old. He was a clerk in a baggage-transport firm--Gondrand Frères, I believe. He had a week's holiday, in which time he was going to make a big circular walk, something like the Englishman's. But he was accustomed to this mountain walking: he belonged to a Sportverein. Manfully he marched in his thick hob-nailed boots, earnestly he scrambled up the rocks.

We were in the crest of the pass. Broad snow-patched slopes came down from the pure sky; the defile was full of stones, all bare stones, enormous ones as big as a house, and small ones, pebbles. Through these the road wound in silence, through this upper, transcendent desolation, wherein was only the sound of the stream. Sky and snow-patched slopes, then the stony, rocky bed of the defile, full of morning sunshine: this was all. We were crossing in silence from the northern world to the southern.

But he, Emil, was going to take the train back, through the tunnel, in the evening, to resume his circular walk at Göschenen.

I, however, was going on, over the ridge of the world, from the north into the south. So I was glad.

We climbed up the gradual incline for a long time. The slopes above became lower, they began to recede. The sky was very near, we were walking under the sky.

Then the defile widened out, there was an open place before us, the very top of the pass. Also there were low barracks, and soldiers. We heard firing. Standing still, we saw on the slopes of snow, under the radiant blue heaven, tiny puffs of smoke, then some small black figures crossing the snow patch, then another rattle of rifle-fire, rattling dry and unnatural in the upper, skyey air, between the rocks.

'Das ist schön,' said my companion, in his simple admiration.

'Hübsch,' I said.

'But that would be splendid, to be firing up there, manoeuvring up in the snow.'

And he began to tell me how hard a soldier's life was, how hard the soldier was drilled.

'You don't look forward to it?' I said.

'Oh yes, I do. I want to be a soldier, I want to serve my time.'

'Why?'I said.

'For the exercise, the life, the drilling. One becomes strong.'

'Do all the Swiss want to serve their time in the army?' I asked.

'Yes--they all want to. It is good for every man, and it keeps us all together. Besides, it is only for a year. For a year it is very good. The Germans have three years--that is too long, that is bad.'

I told him how the soldiers in Bavaria hated the military service.

'Yes,' he said, 'that is true of Germans. The system is different. Ours is much better; in Switzerland a man enjoys his time as a soldier. I want to go.'

So we watched the black dots of soldiers crawling over the high snow, listened to the unnatural dry rattle of guns, up there.

Then we were aware of somebody whistling, of soldiers yelling down the road. We were to come on, along the level, over the bridge. So we marched quickly forward, away from the slopes, towards the hotel, once a monastery, that stood in the distance. The light was blue and clear on the reedy lakes of this upper place; it was a strange desolation of water and bog and rocks and road, hedged by the snowy slopes round the rim, under the very sky.

The soldier was yelling again. I could not tell what he said.

'He says if we don't run we can't come at all,' said Emil.

'I won't run,' I said.

So we hurried forwards, over the bridge, where the soldier on guard was standing.

'Do you want to be shot?' he said angrily, as we came up.

'No, thanks,' I said.

Emil was very serious.

'How long should we have had to wait if we hadn't got through now?' he asked the soldier, when we were safely out of danger.

'Till one o'clock,' was the reply.

'Two hours!' said Emil, strangely elated. 'We should have had to wait two hours before we could come on. He was riled that we didn't run,' and he laughed with glee.

So we marched over the level to the hotel. We called in for a glass of hot milk. I asked in German. But the maid, a pert hussy, elegant and superior, was French. She served us with great contempt, as two worthless creatures, poverty-stricken. It abashed poor Emil, but we managed to laugh at her. This made her very angry. In the smoking-room she raised up her voice in French:

'Du lait chaud pour les chameaux.'

'Some hot milk for the camels, she says,' I translated for Emil. He was covered with confusion and youthful anger.

But I called to her, tapped the table and called:

'Mademoiselle!'

She appeared flouncingly in the doorway.

'Encore du lait pour les chameaux,' I said.

And she whisked our glasses off the table, and flounced out without a word.

But she would not come in again with the milk. A German girl brought it. We laughed, and she smiled primly.

When we set forth again, Emil rolled up his sleeves and turned back his shirt from his neck and breast, to do the thing thoroughly. Besides, it was midday, and the sun was hot; and, with his bulky pack on his back, he suggested the camel of the French maid more than ever.

We were on the downward slope. Only a short way from the hotel, and there was the drop, the great cleft in the mountains running down from this shallow pot among the peaks.

The descent on the south side is much more precipitous and wonderful than the ascent from the north. On the south, the rocks are craggy and stupendous; the little river falls headlong down; it is not a stream, it

is one broken, panting cascade far away in the gulley below, in the darkness.

But on the slopes the sun pours in, the road winds down with its tail in its mouth, always in endless loops returning on itself. The mules that travel upward seem to be treading in a mill.

Emil took the narrow tracks, and, like the water, we cascaded down, leaping from level to level, leaping, running, leaping, descending headlong, only resting now and again when we came down on to another level of the high-road.

Having begun, we could not help ourselves, we were like two stones bouncing down. Emil was highly elated. He waved his thin, bare, white arms as he leapt, his chest grew pink with the exercise. Now he felt he was doing something that became a member of his Sportverein. Down we went, jumping, running, britching.

It was wonderful on this south side, so sunny, with feathery trees and deep black shadows. It reminded me of Goethe, of the romantic period:

Kennst du das Land, wo die Citronen blühen?

So we went tumbling down into the south, very swiftly, along with the tumbling stream. But it was very tiring. We went at a great pace down the gully, between the sheer rocks. Trees grew in the ledges high over

our heads, trees grew down below. And ever we descended.

Till gradually the gully opened, then opened into a wide valley-head, and we saw Airolo away below us, the railway emerging from its hole, the whole valley like a cornucopia full of sunshine.

Poor Emil was tired, more tired than I was. And his big boots had hurt his feet in the descent. So, having come to the open valley-head, we went more gently. He had become rather quiet.

The head of the valley had that half-tamed, ancient aspect that reminded me of the Romans. I could only expect the Roman legions to be encamped down there; and the white goats feeding on the bushes belonged to a Roman camp.

But no, we saw again the barracks of the Swiss soldiery, and again we were in the midst of rifle-fire and manoeuvres. But we went evenly, tired now, and hungry. We had nothing to eat.

It is strange how different the sun-dried, ancient, southern slopes of the world are, from the northern slopes. It is as if the god Pan really had his home among these sun-bleached stones and tough, sun-dark trees. And one knows it all in one's blood, it is pure, sun-dried memory. So I was content, coming down into Airolo.

We found the streets were Italian, the houses sunny outside and dark

within, like Italy, there were laurels in the road. Poor Emil was a foreigner all at once. He rolled down his shirt sleeves and fastened his shirt-neck, put on his coat and collar, and became a foreigner in his soul, pale and strange.

I saw a shop with vegetables and grapes, a real Italian shop, a dark cave.

'Quanto costa l'uva?' were my first words in the south.

'Sessanta al chilo,' said the girl.

And it was as pleasant as a drink of wine, the Italian.

So Emil and I ate the sweet black grapes as we went to the station.

He was very poor. We went into the third-class restaurant at the station. He ordered beer and bread and sausage; I ordered soup and boiled beef and vegetables.

They brought me a great quantity, so, whilst the girl was serving coffee-with-rum to the men at the bar, I took another spoon and knife and fork and plates for Emil, and we had two dinners from my one. When the girl--she was a woman of thirty-five--came back, she looked at us sharply. I smiled at her coaxingly; so she gave a small, kindly smile in reply.

'Ja, dies ist reizend,' said Emil, sotto voce, exulting. He was very shy. But we were curiously happy, in that railway restaurant.

Then we sat very still, on the platform, and waited for the train. It was like Italy, pleasant and social to wait in the railway station, all the world easy and warm in its activity, with the sun shining.

I decided to take a franc's worth of train-journey. So I chose my station. It was one franc twenty, third class. Then my train came, and Emil and I parted, he waving to me till I was out of sight. I was sorry he had to go back, he did so want to venture forth.

So I slid for a dozen miles or more, sleepily, down the Ticino valley, sitting opposite two fat priests in their feminine black.

When I got out at my station I felt for the first time ill at ease. Why was I getting out at this wayside place, on to the great, raw high-road? I did not know. But I set off walking. It was nearly tea-time.

Nothing in the world is more ghastly than these Italian roads, new, mechanical, belonging to a machine life. The old roads are wonderful, skilfully aiming their way. But these new great roads are desolating, more desolating than all the ruins in the world.

I walked on and on, down the Ticino valley, towards Bellinzona. The

valley was perhaps beautiful: I don't know. I can only remember the road. It was broad and new, and it ran very often beside the railway. It ran also by quarries and by occasional factories, also through villages. And the quality of its sordidness is something that does not bear thinking of, a quality that has entered Italian life now, if it was not there before.

Here and there, where there were quarries or industries, great lodging-houses stood naked by the road, great, grey, desolate places; and squalid children were playing round the steps, and dirty men slouched in. Everything seemed under a weight.

Down the road of the Ticino valley I felt again my terror of this new world which is coming into being on top of us. One always feels it in a suburb, on the edge of a town, where the land is being broken under the advance of houses. But this is nothing, in England, to the terror one feels on the new Italian roads, where these great blind cubes of dwellings rise stark from the destroyed earth, swarming with a sort of verminous life, really verminous, purely destructive.

It seems to happen when the peasant suddenly leaves his home and becomes a workman. Then an entire change comes over everywhere. Life is now a matter of selling oneself to slave-work, building roads or labouring in quarries or mines or on the railways, purposeless, meaningless, really slave-work, each integer doing his mere labour, and all for no purpose, except to have money, and to get away from the old system.

These Italian navvies work all day long, their whole life is engaged in the mere brute labour. And they are the navvies of the world. And whilst they are navvying, they are almost shockingly indifferent to their circumstances, merely callous to the dirt and foulness.

It is as if the whole social form were breaking down, and the human element swarmed within the disintegration, like maggots in cheese. The roads, the railways are built, the mines and quarries are excavated, but the whole organism of life, the social organism, is slowly crumbling and caving in, in a kind of process of dry rot, most terrifying to see. So that it seems as though we should be left at last with a great system of roads and railways and industries, and a world of utter chaos seething upon these fabrications: as if we had created a steel framework, and the whole body of society were crumbling and rotting in between. It is most terrifying to realize; and I have always felt this terror upon a new Italian high-road--more there than anywhere.

The remembrance of the Ticino valley is a sort of nightmare to me. But it was better when at last, in the darkness of night, I got into Bellinzona. In the midst of the town one felt the old organism still living. It is only at its extremities that it is falling to pieces, as in dry rot.

In the morning, leaving Bellinzona, again I went in terror of the new, evil high-road, with its skirting of huge cubical houses and its

seething navvy population. Only the peasants driving in with fruit were consoling. But I was afraid of them: the same spirit had set in in them.

I was no longer happy in Switzerland, not even when I was eating great blackberries and looking down at the Lago Maggiore, at Locarno, lying by the lake; the terror of the callous, disintegrating process was too strong in me.

At a little inn a man was very good to me. He went into his garden and fetched me the first grapes and apples and peaches, bringing them in amongst leaves, and heaping them before me. He was Italian-Swiss; he had been in a bank in Bern; now he had retired, had bought his paternal home, and was a free man. He was about fifty years old; he spent all his time in his garden; his daughter attended to the inn.

He talked to me, as long as I stayed, about Italy and Switzerland and work and life. He was retired, he was free. But he was only nominally free. He had only achieved freedom from labour. He knew that the system he had escaped at last, persisted, and would consume his sons and his grandchildren. He himself had more or less escaped back to the old form; but as he came with me on to the hillside, looking down the high-road at Lugano in the distance, he knew that his old order was collapsing by a slow process of disintegration.

Why did he talk to me as if I had any hope, as if I represented any positive truth as against this great negative truth that was advancing

up the hill-side. Again I was afraid. I hastened down the high-road, past the houses, the grey, raw crystals of corruption.

I saw a girl with handsome bare legs, ankles shining like brass in the sun. She was working in a field, on the edge of a vineyard. I stopped to look at her, suddenly fascinated by her handsome naked flesh that shone like brass.

Then she called out to me, in a jargon I could not understand, something mocking and challenging. And her voice was raucous and challenging; I went on, afraid.

In Lugano I stayed at a German hotel. I remember sitting on a seat in the darkness by the lake, watching the stream of promenaders patrolling the edge of the water, under the trees and the lamps. I can still see many of their faces: English, German, Italian, French. And it seemed here, here in this holiday-place, was the quick of the disintegration, the dry-rot, in this dry, friable flux of people backwards and forwards on the edge of the lake, men and women from the big hotels, in evening dress, curiously sinister, and ordinary visitors, and tourists, and workmen, youths, men of the town, laughing, jeering. It was curiously and painfully sinister, almost obscene.

I sat a long time among them, thinking of the girl with her limbs of glowing brass. Then at last I went up to the hotel, and sat in the lounge looking at the papers. It was the same here as down below, though

not so intense, the feeling of horror.

So I went to bed. The hotel was on the edge of a steep declivity. I wondered why the whole hills did not slide down, in some great natural catastrophe.

In the morning I walked along the side of the Lake of Lugano, to where I could take a steamer to ferry me down to the end. The lake is not beautiful, only picturesque. I liked most to think of the Romans coming to it.

So I steamed down to the lower end of the water. When I landed and went along by a sort of railway I saw a group of men. Suddenly they began to whoop and shout. They were hanging on to an immense pale bullock, which was slung up to be shod; and it was lunging and kicking with terrible energy. It was strange to see that mass of pale, soft-looking flesh working with such violent frenzy, convulsed with violent, active frenzy, whilst men and women hung on to it with ropes, hung on and weighed it down. But again it scattered some of them in its terrible convulsion. Human beings scattered into the road, the whole place was covered with hot dung. And when the bullock began to lunge again, the men set up a howl, half of triumph, half of derision.

I went on, not wanting to see. I went along a very dusty road. But it was not so terrifying, this road. Perhaps it was older.

In dreary little Chiasso I drank coffee, and watched the come and go through the Customs. The Swiss and the Italian Customs officials had their offices within a few yards of each other, and everybody must stop. I went in and showed my rucksack to the Italian, then I mounted a tram, and went to the Lake of Como.

In the tram were dressed-up women, fashionable, but business-like. They had come by train to Chiasso, or else had been shopping in the town.

When we came to the terminus a young miss, dismounting before me, left behind her parasol. I had been conscious of my dusty, grimy appearance as I sat in the tram, I knew they thought me a workman on the roads. However, I forgot that when it was time to dismount.

'Pardon, Mademoiselle,' I said to the young miss. She turned and withered me with a rather overdone contempt--'bourgeoise,' I said to myself, as I looked at her--'Vous avez laissé votre parasol.'

She turned, and with a rapacious movement darted upon her parasol. How her soul was in her possessions! I stood and watched her. Then she went into the road and under the trees, haughty, a demoiselle. She had on white kid boots.

I thought of the Lake of Como what I had thought of Lugano: it must have been wonderful when the Romans came there. Now it is all villas. I think only the sunrise is still wonderful, sometimes.

I took the steamer down to Como, and slept in a vast old stone cavern of an inn, a remarkable place, with rather nice people. In the morning I went out. The peace and the bygone beauty of the cathedral created the glow of the great past. And in the market-place they were selling chestnuts wholesale, great heaps of bright, brown chestnuts, and sacks of chestnuts, and peasants very eager selling and buying. I thought of Como, it must have been wonderful even a hundred years ago. Now it is cosmopolitan, the cathedral is like a relic, a museum object, everywhere stinks of mechanical money-pleasure. I dared not risk walking to Milan: I took a train. And there, in Milan, sitting in the Cathedral Square, on Saturday afternoon, drinking Bitter Campari and watching the swarm of Italian city-men drink and talk vivaciously, I saw that here the life was still vivid, here the process of disintegration was vigorous, and centred in a multiplicity of mechanical activities that engage the human mind as well as the body. But always there was the same purpose stinking in it all, the mechanizing, the perfect mechanizing of human life.