

SIX CENTURIES OF SELF-GOVERNMENT.

ON the first day of August, 1291, just six hundred years ago, a group of unpretentious patriots, ignored by the great world, signed a document which united into a loose confederation the three peasant communities of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden, situated on the Lake of Lucerne in Switzerland. By this act they laid the foundation upon which the Swiss state was afterward reared, and it is therefore with just pride that the Swiss people have determined to celebrate this summer the sixth centennial of their national existence with popular holidays and appropriate festivities. In their naive but prophetic faith the contracting parties called this agreement a perpetual pact, and they set forth in the Latin legal phraseology of the day that, seeing the malice of the times, they found it necessary to take an oath to defend one another against outsiders, and to keep order within their own boundaries; at the same time carefully stating that the object of the league was to maintain lawfully established conditions. On the whole, it was a conservative utterance, — a sort of compromise between a declaration of independence from the petty nobles who harassed them and an oath of allegiance to the feudal system itself, as befitting a people conscious of a grievance, and yet unwilling to break with the past.

Nothing more beautiful could be imagined than the surroundings amid which this historic document was signed. The name of the exact spot is not given in the text, but, judging from indirect evidence, the choice lies among three places so near to one another upon the Lake of Lucerne that in any case the environment must have been very much the same. There is a strong probability in favor of the village of Brunnen, because the text of a subsequent pact,

which the Confederates concluded in 1315, mentions it as the place of signature. Travelers will remember this village on account of its incomparable position in the angle formed by the abrupt turn which the Lake of Lucerne takes to the south, where it opens out into an arm known as the Lake of Uri. Brunnen is now a favorite summer resort, with large hotels, monumental omnibuses, wood-carving stalls, and all the other paraphernalia of a Swiss tourist place; yet at the time of the primitive pact it must have been a little hamlet of sunburnt chalets. But that delightful outlook over both branches of the lake has never changed, where, touched by the sun, the water sparkles into vivid blues and greens; nor can the matchless velvet of the higher slopes lose its gentle charm, or the snows on the Uri Rothstock their tranquil magnificence, for they are immutable glories on the face of Nature.

According to the White Book of Sarnen, the semi-legendary chronicle which contains the first full version of the story of William Tell, the three lands, when once united, "held diets at Beckenried, when they had aught to do;" while in another part of the chronicle it is said that the three Confederates and their companions "went by night towards the Myten Stein to a corner called *jm Rüdli* [Rütli], . . . and held diets at that time nowhere but *jm Rüdli*." Beckenried is a modest village, within sight of Brunnen, on the southern shore of the lake, hiding behind some enormous walnut-trees that stand by the water side, — a rural hamlet, whose habitual quiet is disturbed only by the periodic visits of the brisk little steamer that stops at the dock with much churning of the water and ringing of bells. The Rütli is a sloping, uneven meadow upon the

flank of the mountain opposite Brunnen, and dear to every Swiss heart as the traditional cradle of national liberty; while the Myten Stein is a striking landmark, being a jagged rock that rises some eighty feet from the surface of the water, and is now covered with an inscription in honor of Schiller. In point of fact, the evidence in favor of Brunnen or Beckenried as the place of signature in 1291 is incomplete; but it must be acknowledged that the position of the Rütli is a strong argument in favor of its being the scene of earlier secret meetings. For who that has visited the spot can have failed to notice how wonderfully it is adapted for the meeting of confederates? At once central for the inhabitants of the three Forest States, and yet secluded to a remarkable degree, it possesses in reality all the requirements of an ideal trysting-place.

It is the misfortune of Swiss history that although very little is popularly known about it, that little is almost invariably incorrect. The subject has so long lain neglected in the literary garret that the cobwebs have gathered over it and hidden the treasure. The task of brushing them all away would be too great for the writer of this article; suffice it to set aside the fundamental misconception which obtains concerning the origin of the Swiss Confederation. There is a widespread but vague idea that a regularly organized republic has existed in the Alps from time immemorial under the name of Helvetia. Nothing could be more misleading; for, as a matter of fact, the Swiss Confederation had no existence before the perpetual pact of 1291, at which date it makes its first entry upon the historic stage. As for the Celtic tribe of the Helvetii, who inhabited parts of Switzerland under the Roman dominion, they had no more to do with founding the Swiss Confederation than had the Indians in America to do with framing the Constitution of the United States. Around the three

communities, Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden, as a nucleus, the Swiss Confederation grew in course of time by the adherence of other sovereign communities, until it reached its present proportions of twenty-two cantons in 1815. The very name of Switzerland was unknown before the fifteenth century, when for the first time the eight states which then composed the Confederation began to be called collectively *Die Schweiz*, after the community of Schwyz, which was the most pronounced of the primitive states in its opposition to the pretensions of the German nobility. Nor did the early Swiss set up a sovereign republic, in our acceptation of the word, either in internal or external policy. The class distinctions of the feudal age continued to exist in their midst, and they by no means disputed the supreme rule of the head of the German Empire over them, but rather gloried in the protection which this direct dependence afforded them against a multitude of intermediate preying nobles. It was not until 1648, by the Peace of Westphalia, that the complete independence of the Swiss from the German Empire was established beyond question. There is another fact which must be borne in mind, namely, that Swiss self-government is Teutonic in character, like that of England and the United States. Although Switzerland is now a polyglot state, and her constitution expressly says that German, French, and Italian shall all alike be considered national languages, the majority of the inhabitants are German-speaking, and determine the quality of government which shall be in force. The other Romance-speaking cantons were acquired by conquest, and were not admitted on a footing of equality until the beginning of the present century.

A good map is an indispensable commentary on Swiss history, for the peculiar geographical features of the country have their counterparts in its political institutions. The great mountain ranges