

# A Letter from Switzerland

By RENÉ RAPIN

SWITZERLAND, like America, is a federation. But it is a federation of states (the twenty-two Cantons) most of which, before they united and formed into a commonwealth, had a separate existence of their own—some having been more or less independent units of the nondescript conglomeration of cities, bishoprics, baronies, dukedoms, and what-not, called the Holy Roman Empire which once spread all over Central Europe and Italy, others having been faithful or rebellious subjects of the dukes of Savoy, the Bernese Republic, this king, or that bishop; some having turned Protestants at the Reformation, others having kept the old faith. Thus had every little state, when it entered the Confederation, its own history, its own traditions, its religion, its language, or languages.

The Cantons have now learnt to live in common; Roman Catholics and Protestants have come to tolerate each other's opinions; the Latin minorities (about twenty-three per cent of the Swiss speak French, four per cent Italian, and one per cent Romanish) have equal rights with the German majority (seventy-two per cent of the whole population). So that today, after centuries of federal existence, there is not only a Swiss army, a Swiss civil law, a Swiss foreign policy, but also, in spite of racial and religious differences, a Swiss standard of living, education, and morality.

But there is no Swiss language. Consequently, if we call literature the ensemble of the works written in one language, there is no Swiss literature.

There is no Swiss literature, but there is literature (or rather are literatures) in Switzerland, and you will not read many German Swiss and French Swiss authors before you notice that they have much in common, that their work has some definitely Swiss traits: having all had a Protestant education (Catholic Switzerland has been strangely unvoiced as yet), their moral background is, not unnaturally, apt to be the same; they have the same interest in analysis, and, with the possible exception of Rousseau, the same reticence in the expression of their more intimate feelings; they also show that curiously realistic treatment of the fantastic and the mystical which seems to run through the best Swiss art from Holbein and Manuel Deutsch down to Hodler or Ramuz. Yet, however Swiss a novel or poem may be in its subject, its background, its morale, however much local flavor it may have (and it should have much), if it is any good, if it is to be counted as literature, it must hold its own with the best French, Italian, or German work of the same order. You write in French: your work must be French literature; in German: German literature; in Italian: Italian literature.

Not all Swiss books, needless to say, fulfil these requirements. Many charming works there are that, owing to their local dialect, local interest, local satire or farce, could not possibly be appreciated outside the boundaries of Switzerland or even of their own canton. These books often have a raciness, piquancy, and bouquet truly their own: they are but local vintage, fit only for local consumption. Of such is not Switzerland's contribution to the world literature. But Rousseau's "Confessions," Ramuz's "Samuel Belet," Gotthelf's vivid pictures of peasant life: could any books be more specifically Swiss? Yet the "Confessions" and "Samuel Belet" are French literature, Gotthelf's stories and novels German literature. They are (or will be) world classics because they were first (or are beginning to be) French classics and German classics. To put it in another way, for a Swiss writer to be read by the world, he must first be read by Germany, France, or Italy.

This makes his position a difficult one. An American writer often has to wait before English critics or the English public are willing to consider his work an enrichment of English literature. He can afford to wait. His Americanism may delay his popularity in England: it is an asset he has in America. The English do not read him yet: his compatriots do, or will. And his compatriots are over a hundred million. Even should his appeal be to the intelligent few, he will have thousands of readers. Your Swiss writer, on the contrary, while waiting for his work to bear fruit abroad (and it must be read abroad if it is to bring him glory, and the material profit of glory), must seek his readers from a population (and a predominantly agricultural population at that) of less than three million if he writes in German, and of some 800,000 (of whom how many read?) if

he is French Swiss. Add to this the fact that local patriotism is rampant all over Switzerland, so that a Geneva writer will often find it hard to be read in Lausanne (and vice-versa), the fact also that Swiss readers are very apt to judge a work of art by moral standards, and you will have some idea of the particular difficulties which a Swiss writer has to contend with.

C. F. Ramuz and Carl Spitteler are typical examples.

Born and educated in Lausanne, a Swiss (or rather Vaudois) environment has moulded Ramuz. A long stay in Paris has broadened his outlook, steadied his hand, made him fully conscious of what is genuinely his. Experience and suffering have matured and deepened him. His is an original gift: the gift of making others see, feel, sympathize. This gift he aptly applies to the exaltation—a revelation to eyes blinded by custom or convention—of the particular spot of earth, of Swiss earth (Vaud—and more especially Lavaux—and Valais) that he knows best. He is no Frenchman, it is no French landscape inspires him, his moral background is not French. But French is his mother tongue, French is his by birthright and the right of the original artist over his material. He has been writing for over twenty years. He has, with absolute devotion to his vision, worked over and over again his interpretation of the world, of his world. He has come to be one of the two or three greatest artists now writing in the French language, and perhaps the most original and the strongest. He has won to himself many and passionate admirers. A Claudel, for example, acknowledges his rare genius. And yet, how many Frenchmen are aware of his supreme importance? What in him is most original stands in the way of his popularity in France. He is Swiss: French nationalists deny his birthright to the French language; his technique is most unconventional; devotees of Paul Bourget and Anatole France pronounce him unreadable; his treatment of French syntax and vocabulary is novel and audacious: French purists denounce his barbarisms, deplore his "Swissisms." Nor is he a prophet in his own country: his compatriots are only too ready to declare him obscure and insane, too ready to endorse the criticisms the French direct at him.

And all the time Ramuz goes on working. Applaud or criticize him, his work is what matters. Others wrangle and jabber: he creates. Loud is the din of envy, stupidity, conventionalism—yet every year (at last . . .) new readers hear that low-toned, manly voice.

Carl Spitteler (d. 1924), another difficult writer, (let us bless difficult writers, says Valéry in "Variété," the readers they win they give to the classics), Spitteler found it as hard as Ramuz to win recognition and fame. And no sooner had he secured a high position in the esteem of German *literati* than political animosity snatched it back from him.

Cultivated Germany had by 1914 slowly awakened to the unique greatness of Spitteler's epic "Prometheus," a work of genius, but published with as little regard to fashion and circumstances as Milton's "Paradise." The war broke out. Incensed by the German invasion of Belgium, enraged by the approval it met among the intellectuals of Germany, Spitteler, Milton-wise, gave vent to his feelings in a passionate speech. Germany at once ostracized his books, his name was suppressed from literary histories, every criticaster belittled his achievements. (As late as 1925, in a study the "Goethe-Jahrbuch" gave of all known, or unknown, "Prometheuses," Spitteler's alone was omitted.)

Political prejudice has today somewhat abated, Spitteler's eminence is secure once more: Spitteler himself is no more.

Every original artist has to contend with misunderstanding and prejudice, a Swiss artist more perhaps than any other. To fight the good fight, to remain true to his ideal, requires more than ordinary fortitude. Only the greatest have it. The strong only survive the fight.

They are not many. German Switzerland has had four: it has given German literature, and the world, Jeremias Gotthelf, Gottfried Keller, C. F. Meyer, Spitteler. French Switzerland, from Mme. de Staël and Benjamin Constant to Vinet and Amiel (or, today, Edmond Gilliard), has had more analysts and critics than creative artists. There are only two exceptions, but they are outstanding ones: Rousseau in the eighteenth century, C. F. Ramuz in ours.



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## The Wits' Weekly

Conducted by EDWARD DAVISON

*Competition No. 3.* The Eighteenth Amendment has just been revoked. Mr. H. L. Mencken, too full of his accustomed prose, bursts into dithyrambic verse in his next editorial in *The American Mercury*. A prize of fifteen dollars is offered for the most convincing extract not exceeding thirty lines. (Entries for this competition must be mailed to reach *The Saturday Review* office not later than the morning of October 31st.)

*Competition No. 4.* Haydon records that "Keats made Ritchie promise that he would carry his 'Endymion' to the great desert of Sahara and fling it in the midst. . . . Poor Ritchie went to Africa and died in 1819." We offer a prize of fifteen dollars for the most convincing account (in not more than 400 words) of the finding of the volume by a traveler in 1850. (Entries for this competition must be mailed in time to reach *The Saturday Review* office not later than the morning of November 7th.)

The entries for Competition No. 1 (a serious lyric in limericks) will be reviewed and the prize awarded in our next issue.

Competitors are advised to read very carefully the rules printed below.

*A prize of one cent was offered to Christopher Morley, William Rose Benét, and any rival competitors, for the best short nonsense lyric beginning with the line "It's daffodil time in New Zealand."*

A nickel for the best explanation of the combined silence with which Messrs. Morley, Benét,\* and Bacon have replied to our challenge. Here are some headings—(a) Did they get cold feet? (b) Don't they like to compete with amateurs? (c) Was the prize too small? (d) Was the subject too serious? (e) Are they too temperamental to write on a subject not their own?

Frankly, we advise you to hold your talents in reserve for the real battles and richer rewards to come. We apologize for our own stars: but, after all, a benefit performance is a benefit performance and we must not expect too much of the professionals. Seriously, we regret seeming to have advertised ourselves with false pretenses, but we swear the fault is not ours.

There were about thirty entries of which ten set a high prize-winning standard. David W. Reid took the opportunity to practice for the lyric-limerick prize.

*Just where in the world is New Zealand?*

*That great big surrounded-by-sea land?*

*I have a faint notion  
It's out in the ocean.*

*I learned all about it at Leland.*

Beatrice Barry was of the many competitors who made capital out of the antipodal seasons.

*It's daffodil time in New Zealand;  
Is that daylight, or standard, or late?  
Pve a date with an underbred eland  
And it makes him quite furious to wait.*

The rest of her poem was not so good. E. E. C. would have shared the prize if he had not strained too far after rhymes in his first stanza. He begins well with

*It's daffodil time in New Zealand,*

*That contrary antipodes-land . . .*

and then lapses for some lines, recovering himself admirably with

*The eland's not found in New Zealand,*

*Nor yet is the spry kangaroo.*

*The gnu is not new in New Zealand.*

*There's lack of a faunal "Whose Zoo."*

*The daffodils went to New Zealand*

*Which told them to grow and they grew.*

*There's always new zeal in New Zealand,*

*But hardly a rhyme that will do.*

This is really clever. But we divide the prize as evenly as possible between D. F. Rose (who will be remembered from the Phœnician's column as the editor of *Stuff & Nonsense, a Magazine of no Importance*), and "Inverlybad Witherfolks" (the pseudonym of one of New England's youngest poets), both very skillful versifiers.

The Prizewinning Entries

I—Ode on an Antipode

*It's daffodil time in New Zealand*

*Though the voice of the dodo is mute;*

\*Mr. Benét's lyric has since arrived, too late for mention until next week.

*And we'll see armadillos when we land*

*And other strange creatures to boot;*

*Or, if you're not given to booting  
Strange creatures, we'll walk on the pier*

*And hear the Antarctic owl hooting,  
And weep in our beer.*

*For it's daffodil time in New Zealand,  
And what if the dodo's defunct?*

*There's parmigan flying and teal:  
and*

*The junks that the Chinamen junked  
And perches for proud albatrosses*

*Which, though they're not given to song,*

*Have bodies like hansom cab horses,  
And beaks a yard long.*

*Now that summer has come to New Zealand*

*(Where the world is inverted, dear girl)*

*We'll breakfast on brave pickled eel, and*

*I'll dress you in mother-of-pearl;*

*For you know that I love with true zeal and*

*You promised to wed me—remember?—*

*In daffodil time in New Zealand,  
In balmy December.*

"Inverlybad Witherfolks."

II—Spring Fever

*It's daffodil time in New Zealand,*

*It's artichoke season in Gaul;*

*The gentle spring breezes*

*Bring wandering sneezes,*

*And visions and vapors enthrall,*

*Withal,*

*Which isn't important at all.*

*My heart's in the highlands or somewhere,*

*My arteries yearn for the sea;*

*My soul has its eyes on*

*A purple horizon*

*Where romance is waiting for me,*

*To free*

*My spirit from gloom and ennui.*

*The zephyrs sing sweet in my*

*whiskers,*

*From off of a distant plateau;*

*The wanderlust itches,—*

*Let's hitch up our breeches*

*And buy us some tickets and go,*

*What ho,*

*To the land where the daffodils*

*grow.*

Donald F. Rose.

So now to find a file and a penny.

#### RULES

(Competitors failing to comply with rules will be disqualified.)

1. Envelopes should be addressed to "The Competitions Editor, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 25 West 45th street, New York City." The number of the competition (e.g., "Competition 1") must be written on the top left-hand corner.
2. All MSS. must be legible—typewritten if possible—and should bear the name or pseudonym of the author. Only one side of the paper should be used. Prose entries must be clearly marked off at the end of each fifty words. Competitors may offer more than one entry. MSS. cannot be returned.
3. *The Saturday Review* reserves the right to print the whole or part of any entry. The decision of the Competitions Editor is final and he can in no circumstances enter into correspondence.

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