

William Plomer (1903-73)

1 *Anglo-Swiss: or, a Day among the Alps*

[Stainless steel, automatic, antimagnetic, luminous, shock-proof.

Advertisement of a Swiss watch]

1. *The Winter Garden*

A plot of shadow by the Berg Hotel:

Beyond that pure cobalt
Dogs in the snow look larger,
In snow snow-white like salt;

Firs on the ridge look taller, 5
The glossy jackdaws fly
Above the plateau and the salt-pan snow
Under a stainless sky,

And up, up, up, the superlative peaks 10
Hone in a howling glare
Adamant blade-like edges
Against abrasive air:

These are the Alps a brochure 15
Explains are 'peerless viewed
From the Winter Garden of the Berg Hotel
In all their altitude'.

Snug in the winter garden 20
The obvious English wait,
Rendered voracious by the rarefied air
They sit and salivate,

Gaze at the peaks upstanding
Of Alps they need not climb,
The Frumpspitz, the Lockstock, the Kugelhorn,
And keep an eye on the time;

One and all they look forward
To much and frequent food,
And eupeptic fullness seems to foster
A self-complacent mood; 25

‘Alpine air may be bracing
But let me tell you this, 30
Swiss-made watches are antimagnetic,
And so, I find, are the Swiss.’

That’s John, an Englishman, speaking;
He thinks he’s worldly-wise
And out of his wealth of inexperience 35
Presumes to generalize:

‘The Swiss,’ he declares, ‘are kindly,
Diligent, clean, and free,
But no Swiss girl could ever wind up
My heart’s mainspring for me! 40

‘A race of congenital waiters,
They rightly aim to please,
But the female Swiss has about as much glamour
As a waxwork stuffed with cheese;

‘And I don’t approve of neutrals— 45
More cunning than the rest
Of us who have to fight for peace, they feather
A purely selfish nest.’

‘I don’t agree,’ said another,
‘I think you misjudge the Swiss, 50
You can search the world in vain for a people
As well-behaved as this;

‘Avoiding perennial bloodshed,
Unlike the unbalanced Powers,
They’ve achieved a standard of decent living 55
I much prefer to ours:

‘How can you hold opinions

So cheap, half-baked, untrue?
Have you ever stopped to think, I wonder,
What the Swiss may think of you?' 60

2. *The Ski-Lift*

Hoisting expectant skiers
Up from the valley below,
Up, up, up, a conveyor-belt travels
Through snow-upholstered trees;
Bundles of raw material, 65
Passively up they go
To be transformed to projectile shapes
Launched on runaway skis;

The chair in front of him carries
A figure John approves, 70
A pretty woman alone ascending
To try the tempting slope;
As she turns her head to converse with him
And the ski-lift smoothly moves,
Her voice and her face set moving 75
The inward lift of hope:

'I hear you speak unkindly of the Swiss,'
She says: 'Confess you do!'
(French, perhaps, from her accent?)
'Perhaps,' he says, 'I'm wrong.' 80
'Oh, but have you ever stopped to consider
What the Swiss may think of you?
How can you understand them?
You haven't been here long!'

'I may be wrong,' he repeats it. 85
'Oh yes, indeed you may,
So let me ask you to listen to a lecture
I think it's time you heard:
Visiting England I noticed
Only the other day 90
Things you forget when you try to make

The Swiss appear absurd:

'Travel on trains or buses,
You can't see out for grime,
And even when you can your urban vistas 95
Make little or no appeal;
Read any English paper—
A catalogue of crime!
Money is snatched by swarms of bandits,
Even policemen steal; 100

'Rash is the girl who ventures
By unfrequented paths,
And likely to lose what is better kept
Until she is decently wed; 105
Children are starved and tortured,
And wives are drowned in baths,
Cupboards are crammed with strangled harlots
Dragged by the hair from bed;

'Some of your English women
Invite an end so crude— 110
They dress so badly, and most perversely
Cannot or will not cook;
Cigarette-smoking trollops,
Ignorant, stupid, rude,
In dirty trousers and with painted nails 115
How horrible they look!

'Pipe in his mouth, and so complacent
The Englishman is cold,
Far too often deserving
His narrow, graceless wife; 120
Dead to the fears and longings
That other hearts may hold,
His head is full of cricket and football,
Not of the art of life:

'Yours is a grasping, warlike race! 125
I say with emphasis
Nobody loves the English—

All right, I'm going to stop!
I've given a caricature of the English
As you did of the Swiss- 130
Put it in your pipe and smoke it!
But here we are- at the top!

There at the top where skiers
Confront the slopes in bliss
He can't help giving her sun-warm face 135
A quick compulsive kiss:
'This very morning,' she teases, laughing,
'You never dreamt of this!
My name is Yvette, and I must explain
I happen to be Swiss!' 140

Away she flies and he follows,
Their out-thrust profiles glow,
Already their speed is fused with the frisson
That expert skiers know;
Their hearts beat fast, beat faster, 145
Where *she* leads he will go
With a sibilant, swift and sugary hiss
Over the perfect snow.

3. *The Skating-Rink*

Luminous nights in the shockproof
Alps are clear and dry, 150
Stars don't twinkle, they stare directly
Out of a sterile sky;

Metabolistic rates are quickened, the tourists
Sleep-drunk bedward go,
No one is out in the village- 155
But lights light up the snow;

From the Berg Hotel the ice-rink
Looks white, looks bright, looks false-
To an empty rink an amplifier
Repeats the Skaters' Waltz; 160

