

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

Hone in a howling glare

10

Adamant blade-like edges

Against abrasive air:

These are the Alps a brochure

Explains are 'peerless viewed

From the Winter Garden of the Berg Hotel

15

In all their altitude'.

Snug in the winter garden

The obvious English wait,

Rendered voracious by the rarefied air

They sit and salivate,

20

Gaze at the peaks upstanding

Of Alps they need not climb,

The Frumspitz, the Lockstock, the Kugelhorn,

And keep an eye on the time;

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

‘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

The Skaters' Waltz continues  
 Though never a skating pair  
 So late competes with the flying shadows  
 Flung by the arc-lamp there;

Shadows of the wind-swung arc-lamp 165  
 Scribble across the rink  
 And the light at once erases those frantic brush-strokes  
 Dashed on the ice like ink.

For whom are the lights all burning,  
 For whom is the music played? 170  
 Silence and darkness, any Swiss can tell you,  
 Can't help the tourist trade.

Suddenly a pair of skaters  
 Skim into startled sight,  
 Obeying the invisible conductor's baton 175  
 Under the tolling light;

Fused in a wave-like rhythm  
 They sway, a gathering wave,  
 And a dust of diamonds fumes and sprays  
 From curves their skates engrave; 180

One figure is it, or two there?  
 One shadow, black as jet,  
 Waltzing distorted, expanding and shrinking,  
 Commingles John and Yvette.

1954

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