

Edith Elmer Wood

*An Oberland
Châlet*

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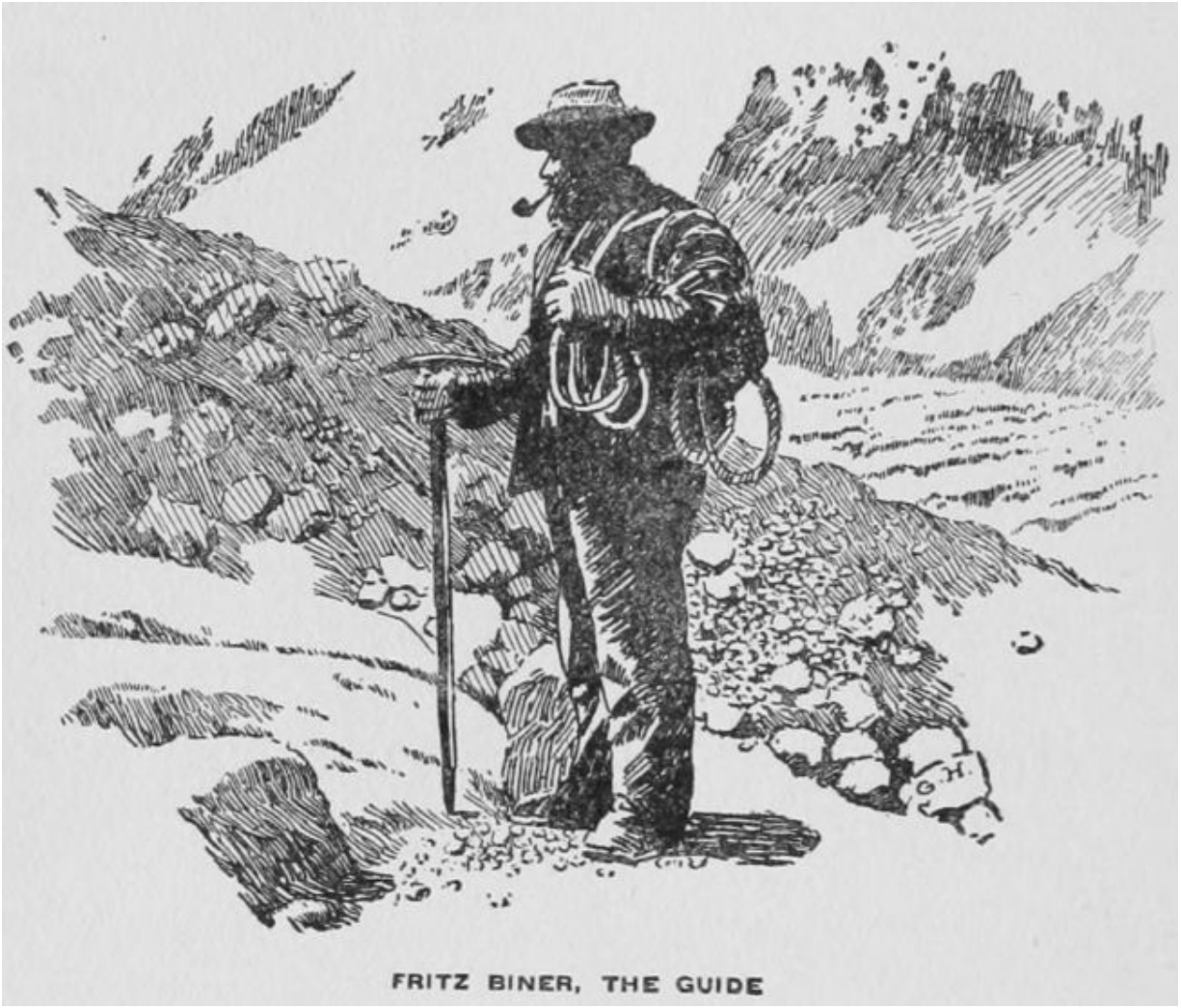
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FRITZ BINER, THE GUIDE

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APOLOGIA

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AT a period when everybody travels, and the yearly number of English-speaking visitors in Switzerland is counted by the hundred thousand, the writer who presumes to offer the long-suffering public a book of Swiss impressions would seem to be courting the yawn reserved for the Nth repetition of the Utterly Familiar. But the discoverer of a new country still has, I believe, some privileges. It might even be considered selfish of one who had found the way back to Arcadia to keep the sailing directions secret. And though there are countless tourists who know the Swiss hotels and mountain railroads, numerous villa people well versed in the tennis and golf facilities of Montreux or Lucerne, and a goodly company of Alpinists who can tell you all about guides and ropes and the ascent of the Matterhorn, there never was anybody who got out of a Swiss summer precisely what we did, or who, in fact, knows our own particular private Switzerland at all.

In the beginning, there were but four—no, five—of us,—Belle Soeur and my two Babes and I and our good French Suzanne, who, besides looking out for the Younger Babe, performed various useful functions about the house. After some six weeks Frater and his college chum, Antonio, dropped in on us from their commencement across the sea, and a few days later the Mother.

Now the Husband-and-Father, who is also the brother of Belle Soeur, and incidentally a naval officer, had been ordered from the Mediterranean, where he had been

cruising, to the Philippines, which are not so nice, especially for Babes, particularly in summer. So, instead of following him when we gave up our little villa on the hills above Nice the first of June, we moved into Switzerland. None of us had ever been there before except the Chronicler and the Mother, who had spent the usual sort of summer there when the Chronicler was a small child. We knew we wanted to be high enough for bracing air, as far as possible from tourist centers and among the really and truly great and lofty mountains. So we went to Interlaken for a start and hunted around among the neighboring mountain villages till we found what we were after. And on the tenth day we moved into the Châlet Edelweiss, which lies about a mile and a half from the Grindelwald station on the road to the Upper Glacier, and started housekeeping.

It did not seem very propitious that first day. It was raining dismally when we got off the train; the roads were full of mud, and the clouds had rolled down over the mountains, so that nothing could be seen but the big brick Bear Hotel and the ugly village street lined with shops and restaurants. I tried to remember how beautiful it had been the day I was in Grindelwald house-hunting, and the others tried to act as if they believed what I was telling them about it, but I knew they didn't, and they knew I knew they didn't. When we got to the house, it, too, was depressing. On the bright sunshiny day when I had seen it before, it had looked primitive enough, but now it seemed aggressively barren and comfortless. Was it possible that we could live in this barn for four months? I could see the effort the family were making to act as if they liked it—all but the Younger Babe,

who made no effort at all, but got frankly quivery about the lower lip and begged to be taken back to the Villetta Valentine at Nice or even to the hotel in Interlaken. "I don't like this house!" he said. "It's an ugly house. It's *not* a happy little home. It's ugly. It hasn't got any 'fings' in it. It hasn't even got any paper on the wall!"

Now, this was quite true. Walls, ceilings and floors were all of the same, well-scrubbed, unpainted pine boards, and "fings" were limited to strictly essential furniture of the plainest type. And it's wonderful how little is strictly essential when you get down to it. But at the age of three material accessories are apt to assume an exaggerated importance. Every infant is by nature a snob till the tendency is reasoned or spanked out of him.

With wholly artificial buoyancy, we wandered over the house, apportioning beds and rooms and hunting for something to cheer up the Babe. We found it to a certain extent in what he dubbed the two "*Charmantes bêtes*" which stood in the dining-room. They were stuffed chamois, and all summer we intended asking if the Herr Secundärlehrer had shot them himself, but somehow we got away without settling the question. A wreath awarded to him as first prize at a *Schützenfest*, which hung framed on the wall, made it seem quite likely that he *did* shoot them. These two *bêtes* formed, with a melodion, a narrow deal table and six chairs, the furniture of the dining-room. The rooms had only been differentiated into dining-room, sitting-room and bedrooms for our benefit. The furniture had all been jumbled up when I saw the house before, and every room except the kitchen had had one or more beds in it.

I wonder if I can make you see the Châlet Edelweiss? It is the regulation Oberland châlet of the better type,—exactly like the tooth-pick boxes if you don't know it otherwise. The basement is of whitewashed concrete and contains a small grocery store kept by the Frau Secundärlehrer when she isn't teaching school or farming, and which she said she was sure would not annoy us because it was so very small and hardly anybody ever came there to buy anything. There isn't any basement at the back of the house because the sloping hillside brings the ground to the level of the kitchen and dining-room windows. *Our* part of the châlet consists of two stories of unpainted wood, surmounted by a big red roof. The shutters are painted bright green. At both ends of the house are broad two-storied balconies. The only staircases are on the balconies. There are moments when this is inconvenient. Above the second-story windows on the front of the house runs a legend in large black Gothic letters, saying that the Secundärlehrer and his wife caused this house to be built by such and such a master carpenter. Some of the houses in the village have verses or mottoes painted on them, and we always regretted a little that ours did not. It was rather nice to see the wife's name associated with the husband's in this matter. Doubtless her dowry had helped build the house, certainly her industry was helping to maintain it. But it was rather decent of him to recognize the fact.

The châlet has been built only two years, so its timbers have not acquired the rich sepia and burnt-Sienna tones which make the old ones such a joy to the eye. But the new kind is better to live in!

The house stands just above the highroad. Behind it the green Alpine meadows roll steeply upward to the Faulhorn ridge, which separates Grindelwald valley from the depression occupied by Lake Brienz. There are between four and five thousand upward feet in this direction, we being at about the four-thousand-foot level ourselves. Below the road, the land runs down rapidly to the rushing Lüttschine, the stream which drains the glaciers. We can hear the roar of the water plainly, especially at night. From the other side of the stream rise almost precipitously the rocky cliffs of the Mettenberg, getting up about ten thousand feet. To the left the gleaming snow and ice of the Upper Glacier, then the square gray, snow-capped mass of the Wetterhorn. To the right the Lower Glacier, with broad white firs and snow peaks, and to the right of the glacier the knife-edged Eiger. These three giants fill up our whole immediate foreground. Far to the right is the saddle-like depression known as the Kleine Scheidegg, where the mountain railroad runs over into the Lauterbrunnen Valley, and to the left of the Wetterhorn, the narrow end of the Grindelwald Valley is closed by a similar saddle,—the Grosse Scheidegg, which separates it from the Rosenloui Valley. To the extreme right is the rift in the mountains through which the Lüttschine escapes and the railroad gets down to Interlaken. But it was all veiled in mist the first day. We couldn't see fifty feet in any direction. There were some few tantalizing glimpses as the clouds began to break apart about sunset. But the family had to take on faith the "glorious views" I had described till next morning.

The one heart-warming spot in the chilly interior of the ch  let that first afternoon was the kitchen, where the Frau Secund  rlehrer, in the kindness of her heart, assisted by her little Dienst-M  dchen, was beating up the eggs and milk, which I had asked her to get for me, into an omelet. We really had no use for an omelet at half-past four in the afternoon, but we would not have dampened her hospitable zeal by letting her see our lack of appetite. So we sat down dutifully at the deal table between the melodion and the stuffed chamois and ate it. Then the Frau and her handmaiden bade us good-night and left us—masters of all we surveyed, including a fine crop of partially repressed blues.

Who would ever have guessed this was the opening scene of the finest summer that ever happened?



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THERE is nothing particularly joyous about the process of starting a new house running anywhere at any time. *Experta crede*. But when you are a stranger in a strange land, whose language you are imperfectly acquainted with and whose inhabitants are as uncommunicative as oysters and inclined to regard the foreigner as an enemy till he has proved the contrary, the difficulties are considerably aggravated.

Among the rank and file of the people in the German cantons of Switzerland, there seem to be three classes:—those who have come in contact overmuch with tourists and have been spoiled by it; the low-browed, stupid type, surly and hostile; and the honest, intelligent, fresh-cheeked, unspoiled, who are never effusive, but frank always and friendly to those who seem to deserve it, staunch, reliable, independent, self-respecting, in every way admirable,—the bone and sinew and hope of Switzerland. The first class are nearly as extortionate and conscienceless as their confrères in France and Italy without the charming Latin manners that make one forgive their iniquity. At their worst, this type is insufferable. But one can escape. Two miles off the tourist tracks, one never finds them.

The second class one can only be sorry for. It is not their fault that their brains and bodies are stunted by cretinism or intermarriage of relatives or insufficient nourishment or too much carrying of heavy burdens. Their skin is sallow, eyes dull, features heavy. One usually finds them tending cattle, whom they closely resemble, or inhabiting isolated châteaux.

If you speak to them, they either stare open-mouthed and answer nothing, or in the most unsatisfactory manner. I do not know whether they are capable of affection for their own people. They certainly waste none of it on outsiders.

There was a man of this type who lived in a *châlet* on the hill above us, who came out and hit the Elder Babe a resounding cuff on the head, ejaculating some wrathful Swiss German, which the poor Babe did not in the least understand. The Babe was doing nothing more sinful than looking in the grass for a pen-knife he had lost, but doubtless this man, with his poor cramped crooked wits, suspected him of some deep-dyed villainy.

There was also a boy in the neighborhood about twelve years old, who used to lie in wait for the Elder Babe with a large stick and attack him viciously. I would have let the Babe (who was seven) fight it out with him, trusting to the triumph of mind over matter, if the lad had not been so absolutely unintelligent and brute-like in appearance that I thought he might crush the Babe's skull with a rock or push him off a precipice if he was angered.

Every once in a while one hears of some queer stupid outrage in Switzerland—the tires of an automobile chopped up or obstructions put at a dangerous turn in the road to upset a traveling carriage. I imagine it is always one of these quasi-deficients who is responsible for it.

In the whole world I do not know a finer people, nor one more charming to deal with, than the healthy, intelligent class of Swiss, God-fearing, law-abiding, domestic, industrious, self-respecting, clean in mind and body. When I had once beaten my way through their

uncommunicativeness and learned where I could get the necessities of life, I found it indescribably restful, after the perpetual battle over trifles of my eight months' housekeeping on the Riviera, to throw myself on the mercy of these good people, secure in the consciousness that they would take no advantage of my ignorance, and that the price of an article would be the same whether I asked before buying it or after.

One of the brothers of the family that kept the meat shop was a guide in his leisure moments and was building up a fine reputation for skill and daring. While we were in Grindelwald he covered himself with glory by successfully doing some things that had never been done before. With an Alpinist from Berne, he crawled along the knife-blade edge of the Eiger, Heaven knows how many hours without sleep or rest or proper food, without standing up or sitting down, just clinging and creeping,—a feat which had been accomplished only once many years ago. It was pretty to see how proud his family were of him. A younger brother especially, once his shy reserve was overcome by sympathetic questions, talked about him as though he had won the Victoria Cross at the very least. I do really think they were the only firm of butchers I ever met who did not need to be watched while weighing the meat!

The bakery people were admirable, too, especially the young, rosy-cheeked wife, who usually tended shop, and the bright-faced little girl who brought the bread each morning. They had a small grocery attachment to the bakery, but I found it was not etiquette for me to buy there anything which I could get from the Frau Secundärlehrer in our

basement. In the bakery one day I saw some packages of tapioca stacked up on a shelf, and, with the Babes in mind, ordered some sent next morning. It did not come and, supposing it had been overlooked, I stopped in later to get it. "My little girl took it up this morning with the bread," said the baker's wife, smiling sweetly, "but she found the Frau Secundärlehrer kept it in stock, so of course she brought it back." I must have looked a little blank, for she added, "The Frau Secundärlehrer might think it strange if you got it from us instead of her."

Having learned this local canon, I struggled dutifully to conform to it, though it was by no means always convenient. The Frau Secundärlehrer's store was open only at odd times when the Frau was at leisure. It was always closed during the morning hours when one usually makes purchases for the day. After sending the cook to the village in the morning for marketing and piously leaving some grocery article to be purchased from the Frau in the afternoon, it was hardly soothing to find that she was just out of it or had never had it—and the nearest other grocery a mile and a half away!

There may have been other local rules of procedure equally sacred that I never did find out, and so unwittingly offended against to the end. I do not believe the Schweizer would be forgiving toward shortcomings of this sort. He is beautifully confident that the *Herr Gott* approves of Swiss ways and dislikes foreigners, and this gives him a virtuous rigidity in resisting innovations. There may have been some such all-unconscious sin on my part to account for the strange behavior of the Herr Secundärlehrer at the end of

the season. But we won't worry about that till the time comes.

The way we got our milk is worth describing. The cattle went up to the high pastures a few days after our arrival. They went by our house, and all day long we heard the tinkle of the cow-bells, the tramping of their patient feet, and the pushing and rubbing of their heavy swaying bodies, and the air was full of their breath as though we were in a dairy-yard. All the cattle in the valley go up about the middle of June (as soon as the snow is off the ground) and come down the latter part of September. The pasture lands are owned by the commune, and each burgher of the valley has the right to keep a certain number of cows there. There is a head-man in charge of each commune's cattle, who, with a corps of assistants, lives up on the heights all summer. Their chief occupation is cheese-making. They are allowed such milk and cheese as they need for themselves during the summer (which, with coarse black bread, practically forms the whole of their diet), and at the end of the season receive a share of the cheese made in lieu of wages, the rest going per capita to the cattle-owners. Meat and eggs are scarce and dear, and this cheese forms the staple of the valley's food through the winter.

In the more distant pastures, all the milk not drunk by the cattle men is made into cheese, but from these Alps near Grindelwald a certain amount of fresh milk is sold, being brought down six or eight miles each morning strapped to the back of a man, in a cylinder of white unpainted wood that must hold from ten to fifteen gallons.

Do not imagine that we learned all this at once. It represents the wisdom of the summer, gathered and pieced together, bit by bit. All we knew just then was that more cows than we had ever seen in our lives were going past, and it was a good thing that they were not nervous animals, or their bells would surely drive them crazy. Most of them were small affairs hung around the neck from a narrow leather collar. But sometimes the collar was as much as four inches wide and the bell a great jangling piece of metal seven or eight inches long and about the same width. It must have been a real burden for the cow to carry and the stiff collar a severe infliction. We never *did* learn the philosophy of these vagaries in cow adornment.

The Herr Secundärlehrer told us, on inquiry, during those first days, that the Alpine milk was the best to be had, although it cost more, and that perhaps he could secure it for us during the summer (it was a favor, you understand) if we would say definitely what amount we would take. It could neither be increased nor decreased afterwards and it must be paid for all together at the end of the season. "But I prefer paying my bills each month," I said. "Can't be done," he replied. It was very mysterious, but we let it go at that, and the milk was delicious.

Later, after the young men and the Mother had joined us, I found we needed more milk. I lay in wait for the man who brought the milk, after the cook had tried her hand on him in vain, and asked him if there was not some way by which we could get an extra liter or so per day. He was one of the stupid variety and his "*Nein*" was like the speech of a stone statue (if stone statues spoke), without a flicker of

expression. Wouldn't it be possible if we paid a higher price for it? *Nein*. Wasn't there a head-man who would have the authority to sell me more if I went to see him? *Nein*. I think he regarded me as the Scarlet Woman referred to in the Scriptures and felt that his soul would be endangered by further parley. So he walked off without any nonsense in the way of apology or farewell.

The only milk then to be bought was what came up from Interlaken, and even that we could not buy direct, since the man who sold it did not go on his rounds so far as our house. The baker took in a liter for us and we sent for it in the afternoon, and it was often sour and always pale and watery.

The admixture of water was not entirely unknown in our Alpine milk, for Frater one day came upon a milk-bearer cheerfully filling up his vessel from a mountain brook. Perhaps he had stumbled and spilt some, or perhaps he had been thirsty and drunk some, and of course he had a precise and definite quantity to deliver. I will not believe he had sold any on the side. It would not be in character. And I do not believe it could have happened often, or the milk would not have been so good.

For the benefit of intending housekeepers in the Oberland, I would say that marketing, when one has learned the ropes, is an easy matter, if the family is blessed with good appetites and is contented with simple fare and small variety. In meat there was always veal and pork to be had, beef and mutton only occasionally. When we wanted poultry we had to send to Interlaken for it, and the price was appalling, thirteen francs for a pair of small chickens hardly

enough for a meal. Nearly everybody owned a few chickens, but they would not sell them, and eggs were often hard to get. As for fresh vegetables and fruit, we were wholly dependent on a rascally Italian who kept a fruit shop for tourists near the station and charged tourist prices for inferior articles. The only time he ever gave us good value was toward the end of the season when Antonio happened to address him in Italian, and he and his wife glowed all over and heaped up the grapes in the bag. But that did not prevent them from palming off a collection of absolutely rotten pears on my poor unsuspecting cook the next day! No fruit is grown in the valley except a few late apples on the road down to Interlaken, and the little wild strawberries that come up for themselves in June, no vegetables except cabbages and carrots and the like, which each family toilfully raises for its own use and cannot be induced to sell. The Frau Secundärlehrer had some lettuce which she generously invited us to help ourselves to as long as it lasted, but she would not *sell* it. One hardly realizes that it is summer, for one has to depend so much on canned things. One learns to eat a lot of the local cheese, which is always good. And I must not forget the honey. It is the invariable accompaniment of the Swiss breakfast, which consists for the rest of rolls and butter, coffee and milk. When the bees have gathered their honey from the wild flowers on the Alpine meadows, the flavor is complexly delicious. One soon learns to despise the insipid lowland product.

I must not forget the salt, nor the long morning spent in hunting for that useful staple. I ordered it the first day from our basement grocery. It didn't come, and I repeated the

order. I was told the Frau had none. I supposed she was just out of it and asked Belle Soeur, who was going into the village, to get some at any grocer's. She went dutifully to every grocer in the village and grew more and more puzzled at being everywhere told they didn't keep it. She knew the Swiss used the condiment, for she had been eating it. She inquired and was told to go to the post-office. This sounded so perfectly foolish that she paid no attention to it and inquired elsewhere. She received the same answer. After she had been told three times to go the post-office, she went there, feeling distinctly idiotic as she asked the old man behind the stamp window if he sold salt. To her astonishment, the reply was affirmative. Salt, it appears, is a government monopoly in Switzerland, and, in Grindelwald at least, the postmaster had the exclusive right to sell it. In time it became perfectly natural to say, "Give me five postage stamps and a kilo of salt," but it required practice.