

Robert E. Pfeiffer, February 21, 1933, Kit-Kat Club

EUROPE FROM THE AIR

When asked to choose a subject, I was very much up in the air campaigning, and when I came down to earth, I was appalled at the task of bringing the topic into the realm of literature, or art. I thought of changing the title to that of "Song Birds I Have Met". At any rate, I hope to call forth an evening of travel recollections, the most interesting ones to come from other wanderers, following this paper. Let us invoke some of the charm of the old world.

My wanderlust began in 1906, following my junior year at Yale, when my classmate, Sinclair Lewis, volunteered to show me how to work my way to Europe on a cattleboat. He had, the previous summer, won a bet by going to Liverpool and back on \$3.00. So I followed him to the New York waterfront, where we finally were given contracts by a Mr. Greenberg for \$8.00 apiece. We boarded a ship at dark, and next morning were put off in Boston, with a horse-laugh. Five days we haunted the docks, until persistence won some sort of a paper that promised us jobs as cattle tenders to ship from Portland, Maine. There we were taken by boat, fully expecting to be fooled again, but actually shipped for Liverpool well fed and given a welcome by "Scotty" the cattle boss on an old freighter. Each of the two lower decks was filled with milling cattle, somewhat frightened by the boat's motion. Most of the cattlemen were Russian Jews in beards and derbies, going home by false pretenses, as they had never seen a cow, on the lower east side.

One individual, who was called a "paid man", and myself seemed to be the only ones on our deck in whom the cows would put any trust. Each cow had a rope dangling from her horns, which I would grab, as she approached me, wide eyed from the pitchfork of "Scotty", jabbing her in the rear. Scotty had climbed over the backs of the herd and was driving them up to long rows of railings to which we tied them. He could steer a cow to right or left by the twist he gave her tail, and sometimes I heard suspicious crackings, that might have been bones. By this exhibition of past farm experience, I saved Lewis and myself from the starvation rations of sea biscuit and "scouse", which seemed to be dishwater, with a potato and occasionally a bone sunk therein. Scotty delegated to us the bossing of the gang, and agreed to put the leftover food from his cabin, where he ate with some of the lower officers of the ship, into a pail where we could get it. We would have to sneak it under a coat to the dark corners of the hay, to avoid the gang, and "sunset" was the word which informed us that the pail was ready. Once on the two weeks trip, we thought we would wash our faces, and could find no place except the hogsheads of water at the ends of the deck, provided for the cattle to drink. The boss caught us trying to wash, and made the air blue, with quotations from the scriptures. We wore black shirts, to hide the dirt, but one day we thought they needed washing, and tried to lower them to the ocean on strings, which promptly broke, and left us to turn up our coat collars. When we arrived in Liverpool, we went to a "Temperance Hotel", so called because they served beer. Having bought some English clothes, we threw our own away, and never have I known

more delicious moments than those soaking in a warm tub,- even if we did look like the Gold Dust Twins. Thus my one claim to fame is that I became intimately acquainted with the author of Main Street. But at the time I did not appreciate the honor, for I then thought writing was done successfully only by those who sent up a burst of genius, like the ascension of a skyrocket; whereas Lewis was painfully covering his cuffs with notes, and painfully trying out and discarding one word after another. I never realized how effective was that method, until I read in "Main Street" his description of the young bride coming to the little town, and her future home, and looking out of her window at the little frame church,-"just the color of cold fried liver." But "Red", as we called him then, knew that he was on the right track, as will be shown by a remark of his. We had tramped leisurely down through Chester, Shrewsbury, and Oxford, concerning the idyllic atmosphere of which I wish I had time to more than tease your memories, and we stood one evening before Buckingham palace, and the guard would not let us in. "Well", said Lewis, "I expect to be an invited guest here some day". To which my thoughts replied "you, darn fool". Recently the King of England invited Lewis to tea. Well, we had some weeks in the old Latin Quarter of Paris, on the Bou Miche, and the Rue des Ecoles. Of course I think that old quarter was more colorful and genuine in 1906 than the new Latin Quarter of today, along Montparnasse. Maybe the rosy spectacles of age make it so. Anyway, in 1906 all nationalities fraternized, and went gayly about, without even a passport. And the wines were then so cheap, and the girls so gay. I have been back three times since the war, and the heavy

taxes now make pleasures prohibitive to ordinary people, and Paris puts up the Coney Island fakes to catch the dollars of American tourists. The holiday is not what it used to be. In 1926 I suffered a barrage of tomatoes while passing the famous markets, and cries of "A bas, les Americaines". One can not reconcile prohibition with French philosophy, and yet absinthe is now forbidden, which, I hope, is not the beginning of the end of the Paris cafes, where at four in the afternoon the Frenchman sits at his little table on the sidewalk for his aperitif, formerly called drip absinthe, as some of you may recall, dripping water through the sugar sieve into the amber liquid at the bottom of the tumbler; he calls for the newspapers, or for writing materials, and occasionally is engaged in conversation by bewhiskered friends with silk gloves and canes. Sometimes I think I have caught the reason for their preference for the delight of hours of eating rather than picture shows. But in America, that point of view seems a choice secret of the Kit Kat Club. I am shocked to find that today the American visitors are refusing to eat at Ye Old Chesire Cheese, because it is too dirty, and the kidney pie too humble. In 1906 Lewis and I sat long over the ale, with those long churchwarden pipes of the Johnson era, and Lewis laboriously composed a verse in the famous old guest book. In 1924 I got them to dig out the old book to see the quality of that verse, and it did not seem worth copying. About that year in London reopened "The Kit Kat Club"-- as "the most magnificent dance club in the world", by its own advertising, and Arnold Bennett, looking down from the balcony upon the dancers so "packed in like sardines that they could only sway to and fro to the tom toms", expressed

the feeling "this shows that the bottom has fallen out of civilization". But I do not feel that all would be quite so hopeless, if our Kit Kat of the new world could have, in addition to the wits which it has, the churchwarden pipes, and tobies of ale, that Dr. Johnson had. Some things are better today. We have surely improved our methods of travel. A member asked me what authority I had to speak about "Europe From the Air", and I said I had enjoyed five flights over eight countries and had some vivid impressions,- my only fear is that I cannot convey these to you. For instance, as I flew above the Black Forest, and the Rhine, where my father's grandparents lived, it occurred to me that it would have been exceedingly difficult to convince them, while they lived, that any descendant would look down upon their red-tiled, roofed-over villages in the manner of a flying bird. They would have answered the suggestion with a condescending grin, similar to that which we may confer upon the suggestion of human life existing upon Mars.

My first air flight started from Vienna in 1924 when Austrian currency was 75,000 kronen to \$1.00 but, before describing the airplane, I must tell you about an old Benedictine monastery located 50 miles west of Vienna upon a great precipice overlooking the Danube and the foothills of the Alps,- at a place called MELK. We left Vienna early in the morning, having breakfast on the train, and, as I have always tried to "do as the Romans do", I accepted beer, pickles, cheese, cold meats, rye bread and beer,- an imitation of the natives. We entered the monastery through the rose garden of a boys' school, and admired the chapel, and the view from a balcony 300 feet above the Danube. The priests pointed out holes in the stones of the chapel which they said had been pierced by the cannon balls of Napoleon. They alleged that the

French started this idea of invading other lands and not sparing churches. But the library made the most lasting impression. It was a great hall with mezzanine balcony all round, entirely in black and gold. Ebony giants upheld the mezzanine on the backs of their necks, and, while the woodwork was black,- most of the bindings were yellow sheep-skin. The lower hall had glass cases- containing illuminated manuscripts from the middle ages,- and formidable papal bulls and excommunications. After a day spent dreaming over the monks and art of that long ago, patient time,- we embarked on a steamer, and to the strains of "Beautiful Blue Danube" we floated down the winding Danube as the sunset gilded the misty mountain valleys and islands of the region known as Wachau. You, who have had that experience can probably recall it as yesterday. And do you recall St. Stephan's Cathedral, with the Austrian double-eagle woven into the roof tiles? We experienced the Austrian currency inflation, receiving 75,000 Kronen to \$1.00 instead of the normal two kronen. Soon we had to leave Vienna and booked passage on a small open airplane for two passengers.

As the bus, taking us to the flying field, passed four funerals on the highway, a little cognac was acceptable. They stuffed cotton in our ears against the noise, and put goggles on us because there was no comfortable cabin and the wind cut like a knife. Flying was not so comfortable in 1924. We looked down upon the valley of the Elbe River, with fields of sugar-beets, and ripening grain, for several hours until we landed in Prague, and the bus took us to the quaintest little hotel, that seemed like the cradle of arts and craftwork. It was five in the afternoon, so we left our bags and went for a stroll down the famous "Graben", past the windows of the town hall from which the members of a

certain legislative assembly were once thrown down upon the spears of the soldiers, and we came to the river, from which we could see the great castle.. Thus we were led on and on, from market to church, of wonder and glamor, until hunger came with the darkness, "What is the name of our hotel?" asked John Stoddart, my pal, on that trip. Neither of us could recall. We tried to talk to passersby, without success either in English, French or German. They talked Czechish, and it sounded that way. I did recall that the street we wanted had signs "Karlova", and finally we crossed it. After going to the wrong end of it, we retraced our steps, till we found the market, and recognized the "Tzshrniske", or some such ejaculation, which we were told signified "golden lamb", the name of our hotel. But we had no Czechoslovakian money, and they would not accept American Express checks. A forger had just passed some, on which they had lost heavily, and so we were advised to go to the bank next day. Wearily we went into the dining room, and couldn't guess a word on the wishing-card. So I started going to other tables and pointing to certain foods I fancied, which was creating some amusement,- when up dashed a friendly man and asked, "Are you the gentlemen from Columbus?" "We certainly are; and how did you guess?" "Oh", he said, "I saw the names on the register. I work at Ralston's in East Columbus, and am here visting my brother". Never was food finer than the "Jiggs dinner" he ordered, and, while table-ware was pewter, and saw-dust was on the floor,- military uniforms gave color, and a Bohemian Orchestra the finest music. One of those rare moments. One can hardly pre-arrange for them to happen, but they contribute to the joys of old age in memory. The main railway station in

Prague is named after President Wilson, and they seem to be enthusiastic still, about self-determination. This was in 1924 and I shall never forget our flight across the whole of Germany, from east to west, in about five hours. In that year, by treaty, Germans were forbidden to fly, and their money had degenerated to the appearance and value of beer bottle labels. As we flew over a beautiful castle, the pilot said we could purchase it for fifty dollars in American money. But we were bearish, at that. The other night I met a native of Germany, who had experienced their pre-revolution psychology, and he seemed to detect the same feelings abroad here. He said "it is ten minutes of twelve in the United States". I hope that he is wrong. But we are somewhat up in the air, even here. Going back to our two passenger plane, our next landing is Strasbourg, where they are painting out the German street signs, and painting in the French, which the natives do not understand. I need not tire you with uneventful flights to Paris, and to London in a twenty seater but it was then unusual to find a plane carrying more than two passengers. My last flight was in 1929, from Genoa to Barcelona, in a huge flying boat, something like the "DOX". This took a whole day, with stop for fuel at Marseilles. One has no sensation of speed, or judgment of height over the mediterranean, except from the white curl behind a toy boat down below. But when approaching a harbor it seems the speed is frightful, and the chimneys are too close below for comfort. As you hit the water, among moving boats, the spray flies over the roof, and you feel thankful to get to anchorage.

I would like to rave about the wonders of the world's fair at Barcelona, but will confine myself to the night lighting effect. Through an avenue of pillars, lighted from within, one approached a mountain, on which a royal castle was crowned with a fan of huge beams and about every fifteen minutes the entire color scheme changed; sometimes the fairy world would be blue, throughout, then orange, then white, and so forth. On the terraces illuminated fountains varied in form, at times resembling rose bushes, then cypress trees. A broadcast of opera reached the farthest ends of the exposition; and wicker rocking chairs, for rest, contributed to the enjoyment of fairyland. It was on the cathedral steps in Barcelona that Queen Isabella bade farewell to Columbus, in 1492, and the feet of centuries have made little impression on the stones. Within we saw the large map made by Columbus. While he never realized that he had opened up an entirely new continent, but died in the belief that he had opened a western road to Cathay, - he had always had plenty of contemporaries who held that the world was round. When he returned to Spain from his first voyage, stocks on the Rialto fell 50 per cent; because of the conviction that the caravan routes to China would be abandoned for the easier western sea-route, and that Venice would lose her position as the Wall Street of the world. Even though their premise was faulty, the speculators made the right guess; because the center of civilization did move to the Atlantic. Upon this history Hendrick Van Loon reflects that, as a result of the exhaustion brought on by the late world war, the scepter may pass to the Pacific in future. I would like to stop in old Toledo, and view with you, across

the Tagus river the zigzag military wall built by the Moors, and, upon the outer walls of the great cathedral, the irons which fettered the Christians: and over the door the huge Moor's head, still preserved, perhaps in gloating. The rule of the Moors, with their comparatively rich civilization, lasted several centuries and many families in Spain still receive a black son or daughter. These are received in society without prejudice. As to Madrid, from childhood picture books I had expected old dingy buildings, whereas the government buildings are white and modern, and set off by broad tree-lined boulevards and parks. With difficulty I found the old square of the inquisition, and the street of blood, up which the Christian heretics were led to martyrdom. Now there are palm trees in the square, and yonder terra-cotta tenement house was once the royal palace. Would it come within the sphere of literature or art to discuss the bull-fight for a moment? It has an interesting ritual, which was explained by the Cook's man at my side. The stadium is oval and completely enclosed, holding about 50,000 people. From the royal box, high above, the President gives the signals. Into the empty, sanded arena comes the parade, of gayly dressed men who are to take part, and four-mule teams that are to remove the dead. After bowing to the President, they empty the ring, and soon enters a great black bull with long horns. Men with red capes first play with him, and when hard-pressed, they dodge behind strong barriers, by the walls. After about ten minutes of this comes the next act, the horsemen, who wear metal trousers, and are expected to jab the bull in the shoulder with a spear, and hold him off from the horse. The horsemen receive the charge on the right side, where

the horse now is padded, and if the horse were big and strong I can imagine them having some success. But the poor nags, said to be worn out cab horses, simply furnish blood,- which the Spaniards crave. I saw one horse thrown completely over the wall. Mr Cook's man said formerly more of the poor nags were killed and out of their misery, but since they have the pads these serve only to prolong their agony; because if the horses with broken ribs, chance to survive, they may stand without care, or even food, until next week's show. Now we come to the next stage in the process of wearing out the bull,- the sticking of beribboned wands into his neck. I admired the skill of the men who danced before those horns, dart in each hand, and as the bull charged, reached over the horns to stab. Six banderillas must be placed. Lastly comes the matador, in knee-breeches, all black and gold, carrying a scarlet cape and a rapier, long, thin, and pliable. He bows to the royal box, throws his beret to his favorite senxorita, and advances to the bull. He could easily stab the bull in the side, or kill him, but the crowd would probably lynch the matador. The fans know their ritual, and are very critical. Upon the slightest mistake they yell and hurl seat cushions at the matador. He must go through a long rigmarole of steps and dances before the bull; turn his back to the horns and so forth. If the toreador gets too hard pressed, he falls on his face, and the cape men attract the bull. I happened to see the Brooklyn boy, Sidney Franklin, in that position, and the wicked horn just ripped his belt behind. But he must finish his bull, and I do not wonder that he makes as much money as our

president. He must draw the bull to charge him, by means of the red cape, while he aims the rapier down the neck of the bull and into the heart. A surgical operation, in face of death. If in falling the bull bleeds at the nose, the crowd "boo", loudly, because the target was missed by an inch, and the lung punctured. This long performance of killing one bull must be repeated six times, between two and six p.m. to form a corrida. Each of three matadors kills three bulls. At the end of my afternoon, the crowd surged down on the arena and carried Sidney Franklin on their shoulders. The little Spanish boys think if they can dip their feet in the blood of the bull, they will absorb his courage. As one passes out the gates, he can buy a steak for dinner, off either bulls or horses, which are hanging there. Europe has varied fascinations.

I said at the beginning that perhaps I should entitle this paper "Song-birds I Have Met". I had almost forgotten that. I like to meet people who are outstanding. One can corner celebrities on a liner, better than anywhere else. In 1924 I had one of those impulses to meet an Italian opera singer. I searched the passengers until I thought one answered my idea of the type, and, in my subtle way, I dashed up and asked her, "Are you an Italian opera singer?" "No: I hate the wops." Well, at that,-- she was a light opera singer, of a most interesting family of theatrical people. Her uncle was then playing Henry the Eighth in the great pageant at the British Empire Exposition at Wembley. Her brother is known as Clyde North, author and actor who has a hospitable bungalow in New Jersey. Her father was one of the early

pioneers in film development; and her mother, known as May McCabe, recently had a skit in vaudeville at the Keith Palace in New York that made a record run. Later my companion, John Stoddart, and I did get acquainted with her and assembled a party for sight-seeing in Paris. That sunrise celebration on the spot where Marie Antoinette was guillotined would be material for another paper. We had introductions to Buck Wasshofskey- illustrator of "Paris on Parade". Two ballet teachers from Denver asked us about the great Mr. Fasting in Columbus, and we had never heard of him. Well, now we know him better, and a truer artist, gifted to create scenes of exquisite color and music, never existed. On our 1926 trip Professor Alfred Z. Ripley, of Harvard, whose article in Atlantic Monthly had just caused Wall Street to change its rules, dressed as a "chef", in the masquerade that always comes on the voyage over. Thus we filled our log book. Once, sitting in a Paris restaurant we saw a man trying to put out flames in his huge beard. The waiter saved him. Later we were informed that he was sitting with a great tragedy actress and her young lover, and they were not getting enough attention to suit her,- so, hubby had to contribute what he could to advertising.

And I did meet an Italian opera singer, years later. The "DeGrasse" of the French line was making her first voyage, and became disabled at sea. Four tugs had to come out and tow her back to New York. In the excitement of the discovery of our trouble, I got to talking to a fellow passenger, who proved to be Mina Horne, a singer in Naples and New York. Assisting her to send a wireless for another boat, I received an invitation to meet her friend after the dinner hour. The friend proved to be a baby faced, blue eyed,

blonde dressed all in black, with monkey fur, and hair standing erect just like the stem of a pineapple. She appeared of uncertain age, but I thought I noted distinction about her, and cultivated the opportunity. It appeared that she was a native Athenian, whose husband was once leader of the czar's orchestra. Later I heard her sing "Julietta" in the Metropolitan; it being about the time of her retirement on account of age. After the DeGrasse was disabled, different boats took us over to Paris and yet, by chance, we met again at the Cafe de la Paix, where all the world passes, and formed a party to enjoy Paris, as tourists do. Years later, here in Columbus the "King's Henchman" appeared at the Hartman, and I noticed that the manager and orchestra leader was Samasaud, husband of "Sabanieva". So I went with Mrs. Pfeiffer to the performance, and it appeared to me that one of the minor parts was taken by my friend. Thinking to meet her again, I went to the dressing room, but she didn't recognize me. In spite of difficulties in French, I found this singer was the sister of Sabanieva, and she presented her husband, who sang the tenor role. The whole company was advertised as English, and yet none really were. But some spoke English, and we enjoyed them at the State Restaurant till early morn.

And so we are back in Columbus, and I am up in the air again for want of a place to get off. I leave the song-birds to return to my first topic, "Europe From The Air". My impression was, "how small Europe is in area", -why so much divided?" I found many citizens in Italy, France and Germany dreaming of a United States of Europe, - a consummation devoutly to be desired. May the hatred vanish, and the day come when we can again exchange

visits without passports, and mingle with European nations without embarrassment.