

From Alpine Goatherd to Teacher of Greek – Thomas Platter (1573)

Abstract

Thomas Platter's (1499-1582) account of his life is one of the most famous autobiographical documents composed in German during the sixteenth century. Drafted late in Platter's life at the request of his son Felix, it chronicles Platter's boyhood as a goatherd in the Valais (today southwest Switzerland) and his incredible wanderings as an itinerant scholar. The section reproduced here charts his life up to the beginning of his proper schooling in Sélestat (German: Schlettstadt) in Alsace. He then went to Basel and Zurich, where he lived through and participated in the Protestant Reformation, learned the rope-maker's trade, and studied Greek and Hebrew with the clergyman Oswald Myconius. Platter eventually became a schoolmaster and teacher of those subjects at the secondary school in Basel.

Source

Since you, dear son Felix, as well as many famous and learned men, who for many years in their youth have been my pupils, have frequently asked me to describe my life from my youth onward; for you, as well as they, have often heard from me, in what great poverty I have been from my birth, afterward in what great peril of life and limb I have lived, first when I served in the terrible mountains, and then when in my youth I followed after the wandering students; also later how I, with my wife, have supported my family with great care, trouble, and labour – since, then, this story may be of value especially to you, in order that you may consider how God has many times so wonderfully preserved me, and that you mayest thank the Lord in heaven therefore, that he so well endowed and guarded you, descended from me, that you have not had to bear such poverty; therefore I cannot deny you, but will, as far as I remember, make known all concerning my birth and education.

And first, I know least the time when things have occurred. When I thought and asked about the time of my birth, people always said I came into the world on Shrove Tuesday [of the year 1499], just as the bells were ringing for mass. That I know, because my friends have always hoped from this that I would become a priest. I had a sister, who was alone with my mother when I was born; she has also told me this. My father was called Antony Platter, of the old family of those who were called Platter; they got their name from a house that stands on a wide plat [*Platte*]. This plat is a rock on a very high mountain near a village called Grenchen, in the district and the parish of Visp, which is a considerable village district in Valais. My mother, however, was called Anna Maria Summermatter, of a very large family, which was called the Summermatters. The father of this family attained the age of one hundred and twenty-six years. For six years before his death, I myself have spoken with him, and he said that he knew ten other men in the parish of Visp who were all older than he was then. When he was a hundred years old, he married a woman who was thirty years old, and they had one son. [By his first wife] he left sons and daughters, some of whom were white-haired, some gray-haired, before he died. He was called old Hans Summermatter. The house where I was born is near Grenchen, and is called "Am Graben"; therein you, Felix, yourself, have been.

When my mother had recovered [from childbirth], she had sore breasts, so that she could not nurse me, and I never once had any mother's milk, as my dear mother herself told me. That was the beginning of my misery. I was therefore obliged to drink cow's milk through a little horn, as is the custom in that land. For, when they wean children, they give them nothing to eat, but only cow's milk to drink, until they are four or five years old. My father died so soon that I cannot remember ever to have seen him. For, as it is

the custom in the land that almost all women weave and sew, the men leave that district before the winter, going mostly into the region of Berne, to buy wool. Then the women spin this and make peasant-cloth of it for coats and trousers for the peasants. My father also had gone into the district of Berne, at Thun, to buy wool. There he was stricken with the plague and died; he was buried in Stiffsburg, a village near Thun. Soon thereafter my mother married again, a man called Heintzman, who lived in a house between Visp and Stalden that was called "am Grunde." So the children were all separated from her. I do not know how many of them there were. Of my brothers and sisters, I knew only two sisters. One, called Elizabeth, died in Entlebuch, where she had married. The other, called Christina, died, along with eight others, of a pestilence near Burgess, above Stalden. Of my brothers, I have known Simon, Hans, and Yoder. Simon and Hans fell in battle. Yoder died at Oberhofen, on the lake of Thun. For the usurers had ruined my father, so that my brothers and sisters were obliged to go to work as soon as they were able. And since I was the youngest, my aunts, my father's sisters, each kept me a little while.

I can still well remember that I was with one, called Margaret. She carried me to a house, called "In der Wilde" near Grenchen; one of my other aunts was also there; I know not what she was making with the other women. Then the one who carried me took a bundle of straw that accidentally lay in the room, laid me on the table, and went to the other women. My aunts, after they had laid me down, had gone to the mass at candle-mass time. Then I got up and ran through the snow to a house near a fish pond. When the women came back and did not find me, they were in distress, but they found me at last in the house, lying between two men who warmed me, for I was frozen in the snow. Afterwards, a while later, when I was with this aunt "In der Wilde," my brother came home from the Savoy war and brought me a little wooden horse, which I drew by a thread before the door, until I finally thought that the horse could really walk; therefore I can well understand how children often think that their dolls and other playthings are living. My brother also strode over me with one leg and said: "O ho, Tommy, now you will never grow anymore." This worried me.

When I was about three years old, the Cardinal Matthew Schinner travelled through the land, in order to hold a visitation and confirm, as is the custom in the Pope's dominions. He also came to Grenchen. At that time, there was a priest at Grenchen, called Antony Platter. They brought me to him, that he might be my godfather. But when the Cardinal (perhaps he was still a bishop) had eaten his luncheon and had gone again into the church, in order to confirm, I know not what my uncle Antony had to do, it happened that I ran into the church, that I might be confirmed and that the godfather might give me a card, as it is the custom to give the children something. There sat the cardinal in a chair, waiting until they brought the children to him. I still remember very well that I ran up to him. He spoke to me because my godfather was not with me, saying, "What do you want, my child?" I replied, "I want to be confirmed." He said to me, laughing, "What are you called?" I answered, "I am called Master Thomas." Then he laughed, murmured something, with one hand on my head, and patted me on the cheek with the other hand. At this moment, Mr. Antony came up, and excused himself, saying that I had run away unbeknownst to him. The cardinal repeated what I had said, and said to him, "Certainly this child will become something wonderful, probably a priest." And also because I came into this world just as they were summoned to mass, many people said that I would become a priest. Therefore, they also sent me to school earlier than usual.

Now, when I was six years old, they took me to Eisten, a valley near Stalden. There my deceased mother's sister had a husband, called Thomas of Reidgin, who lived on a farm called "Am Boden." There, for the first year, I was obliged to herd the little goats near the house. I can remember that I sometimes got stuck in the snow, so that I could scarcely get out; and often my little shoes remained behind, and I came home barefoot and shivering. This peasant had about eighty goats, which I was obliged to herd during my seventh and eighth years. And I was still so small, that when I opened the stable and did not immediately get out of the way, the goats knocked me down, ran over me, trod on my head, ears, and back, for I usually fell forward. When I drove the goats over the bridge over the Visp (it is a stream), the foremost

ones ran into the green corn in the cornfield; when I drove them out, the others ran in. Then I wept and cried, for I knew well that in the evening I would be beaten. But when the other shepherds came to me from other peasants, they helped me, especially one of the largest, called Thomas "im Leidenbach"; he pitied me, and showed me much kindness. Then we all sat together, when we had driven the goats up the high and frightful mountains, and ate and drank together, for each had a little shepherd's basket on his back, with cheese and rye-bread therein. One day when we had eaten we set about shooting for a trial of skill. On the top of a high rock there was a flat piece of ground. As one after the other now shot at the mark, one stood before me who was about to shoot. I endeavoured to get out of his way, so that he should not strike me on the head or in the face. In so doing, I fell backward over the cliff. The shepherds all cried, "Jesus! Jesus!" until they saw me no more. When I had fallen down under the rock so that they could not see me, they fully believed that I had fallen to my death. But soon I got up and climbed up the rock to them again. Then first they wept for joy. Some six weeks later, a goat belonging to one of them fell down just where I had fallen, and was killed. So carefully had God watched over me.

Perhaps a half-year later, I was driving my goats once more early in the morning, before the other shepherds, for I was the nearest, over a point of rock called the White Point. Then my goats went to the right, over a little rock, which was a good foot wide, but below which there was, in a frightful abyss more than a thousand fathoms deep, nothing but rock. From the ledge, one goat after another went up over a precipice, where they could scarcely place their hoofs on the little tufts of grass, which grew on the rock. As soon as they were up, I also wanted to follow after them. But when I had drawn myself up by the grass not more than a small stride, I could go no farther; neither was it possible to step back again on the little precipice, and much less did I dare to spring backward. For I feared, if I sprang back, I would jump too far and would fall over the terrible precipice. I remained in this position for a good while, waiting for the help of God; for I could help myself no more, except that I held on with both little hands to a tuft of grass and supported myself by my great toe on a little tuft of grass; and when I was tired, I drew myself up by the tuft and placed the other toe thereon. In this predicament I suffered great anxiety because I feared the great vultures, which flew about in the air below me; indeed, I feared that they would carry me away, as sometimes does happen in the Alps, where the vultures carry away children or lambs. While I remained thus and the wind blew my coat about me, for I had on no trousers, my comrade Thomas espied me from afar, but knew not, however, what it was. As he saw my little coat fluttering, he thought it was a bird. When, however, he recognised me he was so terrified that he became quite pale, and said to me, "Now, Tommy, stand still." Then he hurried to the ledge of rock, took me in his arms and carried me down again to where we could get to the goats another way. Some years thereafter, when I came home once from the schools in distant lands, when my former companion had found it out, he came to me and reminded me how he had rescued me from death (for it is, indeed, true, and yet I give God the glory). He said, when I became a priest I should remember him in the mass and pray to God for him.

During the time I served this master I did my best, so that thereafter, when I went with my wife to Valais, towards Visp, this same peasant said to my wife that he had never had a better little servant, though I was so small and young. Among other sisters of my father was one who was not married, and my father had especially commended me to her care because I was the youngest child; she was called Frances. When, again and again, people came to her and told her what dangerous employment I was in, and that I would certainly fall to my death one day, she came to my master, and declared to him that she would not have me there any longer. He was dissatisfied with this. Nevertheless, she took me back to Grenchen, where I was born, put me out to a rich old peasant, called Hans "im Boden." I had to herd the goats for him too. It happened one day that I and his young daughter, who also herded the goats of her father, had forgotten ourselves in play by a water conduit, wherein the water was led along to the farms. There we had made little meadows and watered them, as children do. Meanwhile the goats had gone up the mountain, we knew not where. Thereupon I left my little coat lying there, and went up to the very top of the mountain. The little girl went home without the goats; but I, as a poor servant boy, dared not come home until I had the goats. Very high up I found a kid that was just like one of my goats. I followed it from

afar, until the sun went down. When I looked back towards the village, it was almost night at the houses; I began to go downward, but it was soon dark. Then I climbed down the ridge from one tree to another by the roots (the trees were larches, from which turpentine flows), for many of the roots were loosened because the earth had been washed there from on the steep slope. When, however, it was quite dark, and I noticed that it was very precipitous, I determined not to venture farther, but held myself by a root with one hand, and with the other scratched the earth away from under the tree and the roots, while I listened as the dirt rattled below. I pressed myself partially under the roots. I had nothing on except the little shirt, neither shoes nor hat: for I had left the little coat lying by the water-pipes, in my anxiety at having lost the goats. As I lay under the tree, the ravens became aware of me, and croaked in the tree. Then I became very anxious, for I feared that a bear was near. I crossed myself and fell asleep, and I remained asleep until the morning, when the sun shone over all the mountains. But when I awoke and saw where I was, I know not whether in all my life I have been more terrified. For had I moved even two fathoms farther to the right, I would have fallen down a fearfully steep precipice that was many thousand fathoms high. Then I was in the greatest anxiety, as to how I could get down from there. Yet I drew myself farther upward from one root to another, until I came again to a place from where I could run down the mountains towards the houses. Just as I was out of the woods, near the farms, the little girl met me with the goats, which she was driving out again; for they had run home themselves the night before. On that account, the people whom I served were very much terrified that I did not come home with the goats, thinking that I had fallen and killed myself. They inquired of my aunt and the people who lived in the house where I was born, for it was near the house where I served, whether they knew anything of me, since I had not come home with the goats. Then my aunt and my master's very old wife remained on their knees the whole night, praying to God that he would guard me, if I was still alive. The aunt was my cousin's mother, of whom Johann Stumpf, who was the preceptor of the second class at Strassburg, wrote. Thereafter, because they had been so terribly frightened, they would not let me herd the goats anymore.

While I was with this master, and herded the goats, I once fell into a kettle full of hot milk, which was over a fire, and scalded myself so badly that the scars have been seen by you and others my whole life long. I was also, while with him, twice more in peril. Once two of us little shepherds were in the forest, talking of many childish things; among other things, we wished that we could fly; then we would fly over the mountains, through the land to Germany – for so was the [Swiss] Confederacy called in Valais. Thereupon came a frightfully large bird, darting, whizzing down upon us, so that we thought that it would carry one or both of us away. Then we both began to shriek, to defend ourselves with our shepherd's crooks, and to cross ourselves, until the bird flew away. Then we said to each other: "We have done wrong, in wishing we could fly"; God has not created us for flying, but for walking.

Another time I was in the cleft of a very deep fissure in the rocks, looking for crystals, many of which were found there. All at once I saw a stone, as large as a stove, falling down from above; and, because I could not get out of the way, I stooped down on my face. Then the stone fell several fathoms down to a spot above me, and then bounded over me; for stones often spring up many spear-lengths high into the air. I had plenty of such joys and happiness with the goats on the mountains (of which I remember little). This I know well, that I seldom had whole toes, but have often cut off great pieces, and had great cuts and severe falls. I was without shoes for the most part in summer, or else had wooden shoes, and often had great thirst. My food in the morning, before day, was rye broth (made from rye meal); cheese and rye bread was given me in a little basket to carry with me on my back; but at night cooked cheese-milk; of all these, however, there was a fair allowance. In summer, sleeping on hay; in winter on a straw sack full of bugs and other vermin. The poor little shepherds who serve the peasants in those desolate places usually sleep thus.

Since they would no longer permit me to herd the goats, I entered into the service of a peasant, a fiery and passionate man, who had married one of my aunts, and for whom I had to herd cows. For in most

places in Valais, they have no common herdsboy to mind the cows; rather, whoever has no place in the Alps, to which he can send his cows in summer, has his own little shepherd, who tends them on his own farm. When I had been with him a while, one of my aunts came; she was called Frances, and she wished to send me to my cousin, Mr. Anthony Platter, in order that I might learn writing. This is what they said when they wished to send someone to school. He was at that time no longer in Grenchen, but was now an old man at St. Nicholas, in a village called Gasen. When the farmer, who was called Antony, “an der Habtzucht,” learned of my aunt’s intention, he was much dissatisfied, and said that I would learn nothing, and placed the forefinger of his right hand in the palm of the left and said: “The boy will learn just as much as I can push my finger through.” This I saw and heard. My aunt said: “Oh, who knows? God has not refused him his gifts; he may yet make a pious priest of himself.” She led me then to the gentleman; I was, as near as I can remember, nine or nine and a half years old.

Then things really went terribly for me; then the hard times really began, for the gentleman was a passionate man, and I but an awkward peasant boy. He beat me very severely, often took me by the ears and dragged me on the ground, so that I screamed like a goat that had been stuck with a knife, so that frequently the neighbours cried to him, asking whether he would kill me. I was not with him long. At that time, there came a cousin of mine, who had travelled to the schools at Ulm and Munich; he was a Summermatter, a grandson of my old grandfather. This student was called Paul Summermatter. My friends had told him of me. He promised them that he would take me with him, and would place me in a school in Germany. When I heard this, I fell on my knees and asked God, the Almighty, that he would help me away from the priest, who taught me almost nothing and even beat me without mercy. For I had scarcely learned to sing the smallest bit of the *Salve* and was obliged to sing for eggs in the village with other children who were also with the priest. Once we were about to celebrate the mass; the other boys sent me into the church for a taper; this I stuck, burning, into my sleeve, and burned myself so that I still have the scar from it.

As Paul now wished to travel again, I was to come to him in Stalden. In Stalden there is a house called “Zum Müllibach”. There lived one called Simon Summermatter, who was my mother’s brother; he was to be my guardian. He gave me a gold florin; I carried this in my hand as far as Stalden, looked at it often on the way, to see whether I still had it, and then gave it to Paul. Thus we went out of the country. On the way, I had to beg here and there for money for myself, and I also had to give some to my Bacchant, Paul. For, on account of my simplicity and country speech, they gave me much.

When we came over the Grimsel Mountain at night to an inn, I saw a tile stove for the first time, and the moon shone on the tiles. Then I thought it was a very large calf. For I saw only two white, shining tiles, which I thought were the eyes. In the morning I saw geese, which I had never seen before. Therefore, when they hissed at me, I thought it was the devil, and fled screaming. At Luzern I saw the first tile roofs, and I was much astonished by the red color. We came thence to Zurich. There Paul awaited some companions, who wished to go with us to Meissen. Meanwhile I went to beg, so that I supported Paul almost entirely; for when I came into an inn, the people liked to hear me speak the Valais dialect and gave to me willingly. At that time, there was in Zurich a certain fellow from Lenk, in Valais; he was a most deceitful man, by the name of Carl; the people thought him an exorcist, for he knew at all times what happened before and afterward. The cardinal knew him well. This Carl once came to me, for we lodged in the same house. He said that if I should allow him to give me one blow on the bare back, he would give me a Zurich sixpence. I permitted myself to be persuaded, so he seized hold of me very firmly, laid me over a chair, and beat me very severely. When I had borne that, he asked me to lend him the sixer back again; he wished to eat with the landlady that night, and could not pay the reckoning. I gave him the sixer; it never came back to me.

After we had waited for the company about eight or nine weeks, we set out for Meissen. For me, not accustomed to travel, it was a very long journey; besides, I had to procure food on the way. Eight or nine of us travelled together – three little shooters, the others great Bacchants, as they were called. I was the

smallest and youngest of the shooters. When I could not get on rapidly, then my cousin Paul went behind me with a rod or a stick and beat me on the bare legs, for I had on no trousers and but poor shoes. I no longer remember all the things that happened on the road, but a few I can still recall. For example, as we were on the journey and were speaking of all sorts of things, the Bacchants said to one another that in Meissen and Silesia it was customary for scholars to be allowed to steal geese and ducks and other edible things, and that nothing would be done to them on that account if they could only escape from the owner of the stolen things. One day we were not far from a village; there was a great flock of geese gathered together, and the herdsman was not near; for every little village had its own goose-herd; he was quite a distance off from the geese with the cowherds. Thereupon I asked my companions, the shooters, "When shall we be in Meissen, that I may be allowed to throw and kill a goose?" They said, "We are there now." Then I took a stone, threw it, and hit one on the leg. The others flew away, but the lame one could not follow. Then I took another stone, hit it on the head, so that it fell down. For with the goats I had learned to throw well, so that no shepherd of my age could do better. Similarly I could blow the shepherd's horn and leap with a pole; for in such arts I had practiced with my fellow herdsmen. Then I ran forward, caught the goose by the neck, and went with it under my coat through the street of the village. Then the goose-herd came running after us, crying in the village, "The boy has robbed me of my goose." I and my fellow shooters fled, and the feet of the goose hung out from under my little coat. The peasants came out with hatchets, which they could throw, and ran after us. When I saw that I could not escape with the goose, I let it fall. Outside the village I sprang out of the road and into the thicket. But my two companions ran down the road, and were overtaken by two peasants. Then they fell down on their knees, begged for mercy, saying they had done no wrong. And when the peasants saw that they were not the ones who had let the goose fall, they returned to the village, taking the goose. I saw how they ran after my companions, and I was in great trouble, and said to myself: "Oh, God, I believe I have not crossed myself today." For they had taught me that I should cross myself each morning. When the peasants came to the village again, they found our Bacchants in the inn – for they had gone ahead to the inn, and we followed after – and said that they should pay for the goose, which they could have done perhaps with two batz, but I know not whether they paid or not. When they came up to us, they laughed and asked us how it happened. I excused myself by saying that it was the custom of the land. But they said it is not yet time.

One time a murderer met us in the forest, eleven miles this side of Naumburg. We were all there together. At first he wished to play with our Bacchants, only that he might delay us until his companions had come together. We had at that time a very brave companion, named Antony Schalbetter, from the Visp district in Valais, who did not fear four or five, as he had already shown in Naumburg and Munich, and in other places besides. He threatened the murderer and said that he should go away. This he did. Now, it was so late that we could barely come into the nearest village, and there were two inns there, besides that only a few houses. When we entered one, there was the murderer before us with one or two others, without doubt his companions. Then we would not remain there, but went to the other inn. Soon they also came to this inn. When, now, the supper had been eaten, everyone was so busy in the house that they did not wish to give us little boys anything. For nowhere did we sit at the table at meals. Also, no one wanted to give us a bed, but, on the contrary, we had to lie in the horse-stalls. But when the older ones were shown to bed, Antony spoke to the landlord: "Landlord, it seems that you have some odd guests, and you appear not much better. I say to you, landlord, place us so that we are safe, or we will create such a disturbance that this house will be too small for you." Thereupon the rascals asked to play chess at the table with our company (for so they called the game): I had never heard this little word before. When they had retired and I and the other little boys lay hungry in the horse-stall, in the night several persons, perhaps the landlord himself among them, came to the door of the room and tried to unlock it. Then Antony, from the inside, screwed a screw in the lock, drew the bed before the door, and struck a light; for he always had wax tapers and a tinder-box with him; then he quickly woke the other comrades. When the rogues heard this, they quickly departed. In the morning we found neither landlord nor servant. This they told to us boys. We were all overjoyed that nothing had happened to us in the stable. After we had gone a mile

we met some people who, when they heard where we had spent the night, were much astonished that we had not all been murdered; for almost all the villagers were suspected murderers.

About a quarter of a mile from Naumburg our grown companions again remained behind in the village; for when they would eat together, they sent us on. There were five of us; in a broad field eight horsemen with drawn cross-bows came to meet us; they rode around us, demanded money from us, and turned their arrows on us; for at that time people did not yet carry guns on horses. One said: "Give us money!" One of us, the largest, answered: "We have no money; we are poor students." Then he said the second time: "Give us money!" Then our companion answered again: "We have no money, and we owe you nothing!" Then the horseman drew his sword, raised it, so that it whizzed close by his head, and cut the straps of his knapsack in two. Our companion was called John of Scalene from St. Gall, from the village. They rode thereafter into the woods, but we went on to Naumburg. Soon came the Bacchants, who had seen the knaves nowhere. We were often thus in danger on account of robbers and murderers – in the Thuringian forest, in Franconia, and in Poland.

We remained some weeks in Naumburg. Those of us shooters who could sing went into the city to sing, but I went begging. But we did not go to school. The others would not allow this and threatened to drag us to the school. The schoolmaster also warned our Bacchants that they should come to school, or they would be compelled. But Antony dared them to come. And because some other Swiss were also there, they let us know what day the authorities would come, so that they would not unexpectedly attack us. Then we little shooters carried stones on the roof. But Antony and the others garrisoned the door. Then the schoolmaster came with the whole procession of his shooters and Bacchants. But we boys threw stones down upon them, so that they had to give way. When now we understood that we were accused before the magistrate, we had a neighbour who wished to marry his daughter. He had a stable full of fat geese. One night we took three geese from him and withdrew to another part of the city; it was a suburb, but near the city wall, just like the place where we had been till this time. Then the Swiss came to us, drank with one another, and then our company withdrew to Halle, in Saxony, and went to the school at St. Ulrich. But when our Bacchants behaved rudely towards us, some of us, with my cousin Paul, resolved to run away from the Bacchants and go to Dresden. But there was no good school there, and the dwellings were full of vermin, so that we heard them crawling around in the straw at night. We broke up and went to Breslau. We suffered much hunger on the way, in that for several days we ate only raw onions, with salt; some days roasted acorns, crab-apples, and pears. Many a night we lay under the open sky, for no one would allow us in the house, however pleasantly we asked for shelter; sometimes they set the dogs on us.

When, however, we came to Breslau, in Silesia, there was great abundance; yes, everything was so cheap, that the poor students overate, and often made themselves sick. At first we went to the school in the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. But when we heard that in the principal parish of St. Elizabeth there were several Swiss, we went there. There were two from Bremgarten there, two from Mellingen, and others, besides many Swabians. There was no difference between the Swabians and the Swiss; they spoke to one another as countrymen, and protected each other. The city of Breslau had seven parishes, and each had a separate school. No student dared to go into another parish to sing, else they cried: "Ad idem! ad idem!" Then the shooters ran together and beat one another very severely. Once in the city there were, so it was said, several thousand Bacchants and shooters, who supported themselves wholly by alms. It was also said that some had been there twenty or thirty years, or longer, with their shooters, who had to wait upon them. Often, in the course of a single evening, I carried five or six loads of provisions back to the school where my Bacchants lived. People gave to me very willingly, because I was so small and I was Swiss – for the Swiss were much liked. People at that time also had a great compassion for the Swiss, for they had suffered severely in the great battle of Milan. So the common people said now the Swiss have lost their best *pater-noster*. For they thought that, before this, the Swiss were quite unconquerable.

One day I went up to two gentlemen, or country squires, in the market-place. I heard afterwards that the

one was called Benzenaur, the other Fugger. They walked together. I asked alms of them, as was the custom there with poor students. The Fugger spoke to me: "From whence are you?" And when he heard that I was a Swiss, he conversed with the Benzenaur, and thereupon said to me: "Are you really a Swiss? Then I will adopt you as a son. I will promise you that here, before the council, in Breslau; but in turn you must bind yourself to me for your entire life, and where I am, you will be expected as well." I said, "I have been given into the charge of one from my home; I will speak to him about it." But when I asked my cousin Paul about it, he said: "I have taken you away from your home; I will take you back to your friends again; and then whatever they bid you, that you can do." I therefore refused the gentleman. But whenever I came before his house, I was not permitted to go away empty.

Thus I remained for a time in Breslau; I was sick three times in one winter, so they had to take me to the hospital. For the students had a special hospital, and their own physician. Sixteen hellers were also paid weekly from the Town-house for each sick person; with this, one could be supported quite well; attention was paid to the patients; they had good beds, but there was great vermin therein, as large as ripe hempseed, so that I, and others too, preferred to lie on the ground in the room, rather than in the beds. In winter the shooters lie on the ground in the school, but the Bacchants in the small chambers, of which there were several hundred at St. Elizabeth's. But in the summer when it was hot, we lay in the churchyard, collected grass, such as is spread in summer before the doors on Sunday in the gentleman's streets. We collected some in a little place in the churchyard, and lay therein like pigs in the straw. But when it rained, we ran into the school; and when there was a thunderstorm, we sang responses and other songs with the sub-cantor almost the whole night. Occasionally in summer we went after supper to the beer-hall to beg for beer. And the drunken Polish peasants would then give us so much that I was often unable to find my way to the school, although I was only a stone's throw away from it. In short, there was enough to eat, but there was not much study.

In the school of St. Elizabeth, indeed, at one time, nine Baccalaureates read at the same hour, in the same room. The Greek language had not yet made its way anywhere in the land. Similarly, no one had printed books yet; the preceptor alone had a printed Terence. What was read had first to be dictated, then defined, then construed, and at last explained; so that the Bacchants had to carry home great, miserable books when they went away.

Thence eight of us betook ourselves to Dresden; it happened again that we suffered much hunger. Then we determined to separate for a day. Some went to look after geese, some after turnips and onions, and one after a pot; but we little ones went into the city of Neumarkt, which was not far from there on the road, and were to look after bread and salt, and in the evening we were to come together again outside the city. We intended to set up our camp there outside the city, and cook what we might have then. A gunshot distance from the city there was a well, where we wished to remain for the night. But when those in the city saw the fire, they shot at us, yet did not hit us. Then we betook ourselves behind a ridge to a little brook and thicket; the older comrades cut down branches, and made a hut; one part plucked the geese, of which we had two; others cut up the turnips and put them into the pot, along with the head, feet, and even the entrails; others made two wooden spits and began to roast; and when it was a little brown we cut off pieces and ate; and we ate the turnips, too. In the night we heard something flapping; near us was a weir, from which the water had been let off the day before, and the fish were springing up in the mud. Then we took as many fish as we could carry in a shirt on a stick, and went to a village; there we gave a peasant some fish, so that he would cook the others for us in beer.

When we had again returned to Dresden, the schoolmaster and our Bacchants sent some of us boys out to find some geese. Then we agreed that I should throw and kill the geese, and they would take them and carry them away. Later, when we had found a flock of geese, and they had observed us, they flew away. Then I took a little cudgel, threw it among them in the air; I injured one so that it fell down. But when my companions saw the goose-herd, they dared not run up to it, though they could have reached it before the herder. Then the others flew down again, surrounded the goose, and cackled as if to encourage it.

Then it stood up again, and went away with the others. I was much displeased with my companions, that they had not fulfilled their promise. But they did better thereafter; for we brought away two geese. The Bacchants and the schoolmaster ate the geese as a farewell, and went from there to Nuremberg, and thence to Munich.

On the way, not far from Dresden, it happened that I went to beg in a little village, and came before a peasant's house. The peasant asked me whence I came. When he heard that I was Swiss, he asked if I did not have any more companions. I replied: "My companions wait for me outside the village." He said: "Call them here." He prepared a good meal for us, with plenty of beer to drink. There lay his mother in bed in the room. Then the son said to her: "Mother, I have often heard you say that you would like to see a Swiss before your death. Then you see several, for I have invited them, to please you." Then the mother raised herself up, thanked the son for the guests, and said: "I have heard so much good of the Swiss, that I have very much desired to see one. Now I think I will die more willingly; therefore be merry." And then she lay down again. We thanked the peasant, and went on again.

When we came to Munich, it was so late that we could not enter the city, but had to remain overnight in the leper-house. When in the morning we came to the gate, they would not let us in unless there was a burgher in the city whom we knew. But my cousin Paul had been in Munich before. He was allowed to fetch the one with whom he had lodged. He came, and spoke well of us, so that they let us in. Then Paul and I came to a soap-boiler by the name of Hans Schrell. He was a Master of Arts, of Vienna, but was an enemy of the Church. He married a beautiful girl, and many years later he came with his wife from Vienna to Basel, and here also carried on his trade, as is still known here to many people. For this master I helped to make soap rather more than I went to the school, and travelled with him into the villages to buy ashes. But Paul went to the school in the parish "Our Lady," and I too, but seldom. I went merely so that I could sing for bread on the streets and give it to my Bacchant, Paul; that is, carry food to him. The woman in the house loved me very much, for she had an old black, blind dog which had no teeth, which I had to feed, put to bed, and lead around in the yard. She said all the time: "Tommy, take the very best care of my dog; you shall then be rewarded."

When we were there some time, Paul was enamoured of the maiden of the family. This the master would not allow. At last, Paul determined that we would go home once more, for we had not been home in five years. So we went home to Valais. There my friends could hardly understand me, and said: "Our Tommy speaks so profoundly, that almost no one can understand him." For, because I was young, I had learned something of almost every speech where I had been some time. During this time my mother had once more married, for Heintzmann "am Grund" was dead. After the period of mourning, she had married one called Thomas "am Garsteren." On this account I did not have much of a visit with her. I was for the most part with my aunts, and most of all with my cousin, Simon Summermatter, and my aunt, Frances.

Soon thereafter we set out again, towards Ulm; then Paul took yet another boy, who was called Hildebrand Kalbermatter, the son of a priest. He was also very young. They gave him cloth, such as is used in that country, for a little coat. When we came to Ulm, Paul told me to go around with the cloth and beg for money to pay for the making of it. In this way, I earned a great deal of money, for I was accustomed to pleasant manners and begging. For this the Bacchants used me continually, though they brought me not at all to the schools, and had not even taught me to read. While I so seldom went into the school, and always, while I should have gone, went around with the cloth, I had the greatest hunger. For all that I received I brought to the Bacchants. I would not have eaten the smallest morsel, for I feared a beating. Paul had taken another Bacchant to live with him, called Achacius, from Mainz. I and my companion Hildebrand had to serve them both. But my companion ate almost everything given to him; then they went into the street after him, so that they might find him eating; or they commanded him to wash out his mouth with water, and to spit in a dish with water, so that they saw whether he had eaten anything. Then they threw him on the bed, and put a pillow over his head, so that he could not scream; then both Bacchants beat him terribly, until they could no more. Thereafter I was so terrified that I brought home

everything; they often had so much bread that it became mouldy. They then cut off the mouldy outside, and gave it to us to eat. While there I often had the greatest hunger, and was fearfully frost-bitten too, because I often went about in the dark till midnight to sing for bread. Here I must not overlook, but must relate, how at Ulm there was a pious widow, who had two grown-up daughters, yet unmarried, also a son, called Paul Reling, also yet unmarried. Often in winter this widow wrapped my feet up in warm fur, which she had laid behind the stove, so that she could warm my feet when I came, and gave me a dish of vegetables and then allowed me to go home. I have had such hunger that I drove the dogs on the street from their bones, and then gnawed them. I have also searched at school for the bread-crumbs in the cracks in the floor and eaten them.

Thereafter we again went to Munich, where I also had to beg for money for making up the cloth, which, however, was not mine. After a year we came once more to Ulm, intending once more to go home. Once more I brought the cloth with me and begged for money to pay for making it up. I can still well remember that several said to me: "What! Has the coat never been made? I believe that you are deceiving me with tricks." When we went from there, I do not know what became of the cloth, nor whether the coat was ever made up or not.

Once more we came home, and from there again to Munich. When we came to Munich, on a Sunday, the Bacchants had lodging, but we three little shooters had none; when it was night we intended to go in "die Schrane" – that is, the corn-market – to lie on the corn-sacks. There were several women sitting in the street in front of the salt-house; they asked us where we were going. And when they heard that we had no lodging, there was a butcher's widow among them. When she heard that we were Swiss, she said to her house-maid: "Run, hang the kettle with soup and the rest of the meat over the fire; they must remain with me for the night, for I am friendly with all the Swiss. I served in an inn in Innsbruck, where Emperor Maximilian held court; there the Swiss had much to do with him, and were so friendly that I will be friendly to them my whole life long." She gave us enough to eat and drink and a good place to sleep. In the morning she said to us: "If one of you will remain with me, I will lodge him and give him food and drink." We were all willing, and asked which she would have; and as she inspected us, I was more pert than the others. I had had more experience than the others. Then she took me, and I had nothing to do except to fetch the beer, and to fetch the hides and the meat from the butcher-shop; also to go with her in the fields; but I still had to wait on the Bacchants. This did not please the woman, and she said to me: "Leave the Bacchants alone and stay with me; then you do not need to beg." Then for eight days I went neither to the Bacchants nor to the school. Then Paul came and knocked on the butcher's door. Then she said to me: "Your Bacchant is there. Say you are sick!" Then she let him in and said to him: "You are truly a fine gentleman, and should have inquired how Thomas was! He has been sick, and still is." He said: "I am very sorry, boy! When you can go out again, then come to me." Afterward, on a Sunday, I went to Vespers, and he said to me after Vespers: "You shooter, if you do not come to me, I will trample you under foot some day." Then I determined that he should not oppress me any longer; I thought I would run away. On Monday I said to the butcher's widow: "I want to go to the school to wash my shirt." I dared not say what was in my mind, for I feared that she would tell on me.

I went away from Munich with a sorrowful heart, partly because I was running away from my cousin, with whom I had travelled so far, but who had been so severe and unmerciful towards me; partly, also, I felt badly on account of the butcher's widow, who had kept me so kindly. I withdrew, however, over the Isar; for I feared if I went towards Switzerland that Paul would follow me; for he had often threatened me and the others that if one of us ran away he would follow him, and whenever he found him, would beat him till both arms and legs were off. On the other side of the Isar is a hill. There I sat down, looked at the city, and wept bitterly, that I no longer had anyone who would help me. I thought of going to Salzburg, or to Vienna, in Austria. As I sat there, a peasant came by with a wagon; he had brought salt to Munich, and was already drunk, although the sun had just risen. Then I asked him to allow me to get in. I rode with him until he unharnessed in order to feed himself and the horses. Meanwhile I begged in the village, and

not far from the village I waited for him and went to sleep. When I awoke, I cried heartily, for I thought that the peasant had driven away. I felt as though I had lost my father. However, he soon came, but was drunk; told me again to get in, and asked me where I was going. I said: "To Salzburg!" Now, when it was evening, he drove from the road, and said: "Jump down, there is the road to Salzburg." We had driven eight miles that day. I came to a village.

When I rose up in the morning, a frost had fallen, as though it had snowed; and I had no shoes, only torn stockings, no cap, and a little jacket without folds. Then I went to Passau, and wished to sail on the Danube to Vienna. When I came to Passau they would not let me in. Then I thought that I would go to Switzerland, and asked the gate-keeper where I should go for the nearest road to Switzerland. He said: "To Munich." I said: "I will not go to Munich; I would rather go around ten or more miles farther." Then he directed me to Friesing, where there is a high school. There I found Swiss, who asked me whence I came. In two or three days, Paul came with a halberd. The shooters said to me: "Your Bacchant is here from Munich, and seeks you." Then I ran out of the gate as if he had been behind me, and went to Ulm, and came to my saddler's widow who had formerly warmed my feet by wrapping them in fur. She received me. For her I was to guard the turnips in the field. That I did instead of going to school. After some weeks, one came to me who had been a companion of Paul's, and said: "Your cousin Paul is here, and seeks you." So he had followed me eighteen miles; for he had lost a good living in me, for I had supported him for several years. When, however, I heard this, although it was nearly night, I ran out of the gate towards Constance, and wept once more heartily; for I felt quite badly on account of the good woman.

When I had almost reached Marsburg, I came to a stone-mason who was a Turgauer. A young peasant met us. The mason said to me: "The peasant must give us money." And said to him: "Peasant, give us gold or, odds, crack!" The peasant was terrified; I also was very much terrified, and wished that I was not there. The peasant began to pull out his purse. The mason said: "Be quiet, I have only joked." Then I came over the sea to Constance. Then I went over the bridge, and saw some Swiss peasant children in white jackets. Oh, my God, how happy I was. I thought I was in heaven. I came to Zurich; there were people from St. Gall, great Bacchants; to them I offered myself, as their servant, if they would teach me; but they did this as the others had also done. At that time the Cardinal [Schinner] was also in Zurich. He was trying to gain influence over the Zurichers, so that they would go with him to the Pope, but, as it turned out afterward, he cared more for Milan. After some months Paul sent his shooter, Hildebrand, from Munich, saying that if I would come back, he would forgive me. But I would not, but remained in Zurich; yet I did not study.

There was one, called Antony Benetz, from Visp, in Valais, who persuaded me to go with him to Strassburg. When we came to Strassburg, there were very many poor scholars there and, as was said, not one good school. But there was a very good school at Schlettstadt. We went on the way to Schlettstadt. A nobleman met us and asked: "Where are you going?" When he heard that we wanted to go to Schlettstadt, he dissuaded us by saying that there were very many poor scholars there and no rich people. Then my companion began to weep bitterly. "Where can we go now?" I comforted him and said: "Be of good courage! If there is one in Schlettstadt who can support himself alone, then I will manage to support both of us." When we were about a mile from Schlettstadt, and were stopping at a village, I became sick so that I thought that I must choke, and could scarcely get any breath. I had eaten many green nuts, for they fell about this time. Then my companion wept once more, because he thought he would lose his companion. For he knew not how to take care of himself; yet he had ten crowns hidden about him, but I had not one heller.

Now, we arrived in the city, and found lodging with an aged couple; and the man was stone blind. Then we went to my dear preceptor, now deceased, Mr. John Sapidus, and asked him to receive us. He asked us whence we came. When we said, "From Switzerland, from Valais," he said: "There, alas, are wicked peasants; they drive their bishops out of the land. If you will study bravely, you need not give me anything; if not, then you must pay me or I will pull your coat from your back." That was the first school

where it seemed to me that things went properly. At that time, the study of languages and sciences came into vogue. It was in the year in which the Diet of Worms was held. At one time, Sapidus had 900 pupils, some fine learned fellows. There were there at that time Dr. Hieronymus Gemaisaus, Dr. John Huber, and many others, who afterward became doctors and famous men.

When I entered the school, I could do nothing; not even read Donatus.^[1] I was already eighteen years old. I seated myself among the little children. I was quite like a hen among the little chickens. One day Sapidus read the names of his pupils, and said: "I have many barbarous names; sometimes I must Latinize them a little bit." Afterwards he read them again; then he had written mine, at first, Thomas Platter, then my companion, Antoninus Benetz. He had translated them Thomas Platerus, Antonius Benetus, and said: "Who are you two?" When we stood up, he said: "Pfaugh, you two are such mangy, raw shooters, and have such beautiful names!" And it was even true in part. My companion in particular was so mangy that many mornings I had to pull the linen cloth from his body as one would the hide from a goat. But I was more accustomed to the foreign air and food.

When we had been there from autumn till Whitsuntide, and yet more students came in from all quarters, I could no longer support us both well; then we went away to Solothurn. There was quite a good school, and also better living. But one must attend church so very frequently, and lose so much time, that we went home. I remained at home a little while, and went to the master in the school, who taught me a little writing, and other things I know not what. There I had the chills and fever, while I was in Grenchen with my aunt, Frances. During this time, I taught my aunt's little boy, who was called Simon Steiner, the A, B, C's in a day. More than a year later, he came to me in Zurich; he studied by degrees until he came to Strassburg; he became Dr. [Martin] Bucer's^[2] assistant; he studied so that he became preceptor of the third class and afterward of the second class. He was married twice. When he died, there was the greatest mourning in the school at Strassburg.

In the following spring I left with my two brothers for foreign lands. When we would take leave from our mother, she wept and said: "May God have mercy on me, that I must see three sons go to a foreign land." Except then, I never saw my mother cry, for she was a brave, courageous woman, though somewhat rough. When her third husband also died, she remained a widow, and did all the work like a man in order that the youngest children could be the better brought up. She hewed wood, thrashed grain, and did other work that belongs more to men than to women. She also buried three of these children herself, when they died in the time of a very great pestilence. For in the time of the pestilence it cost a great deal to have one buried by the grave-diggers. Towards us, the first children, she was very rough, so that we seldom came into the house. At one time I had not been home, as I remember, for five years, and had travelled far in distant lands. But when I came to her, the first words that she said to me were: "Has the devil once more brought you here?" I answered: "Oh, no, mother, the devil has not brought me here, but my feet; but I will not long be troublesome to you." She said: "You are not troublesome to me, but it grieves me much that you go wandering here and there, and without doubt learning nothing. Learn to work, as your father also did! You will become no priest. I am not so fortunate that I should bring up a priest." So I remained two or three days with her. One morning a great frost had fallen on the grapes as one was picking them. Therefore, I picked and ate the frozen grapes, so that I had the gripes; so that I was stretched out on all fours, thinking that I must burst into pieces. Then she stood before me and said: "If you wish to, then burst: Why have you eaten so much?" I can recall many other examples of her coarseness. Otherwise she was a respectable, honest, and pious woman; that everyone had said of her and praised her.

When now I went away with my two brothers, and went over the Letschen Mountains towards Gastren, my two brothers sat down on the slope of the snow and slid down the mountain. I also wished to do this, and as I did not quickly put my feet apart, the snow threw me over, so that I fell down the mountain, head over heels. It would have been no wonder if I had slid to my death, by striking my head on a tree, for there were no rocks. This happened to me three times, so that I shot down the comb of the ridge head

first and the snow fell in heaps on my face; for I always thought that I should be able to do it as well as my brothers, but they were more accustomed to the mountains than I.

So we travelled together from there on, and they remained in Entlebuch; but I went on to Zurich. There I was with the mother of the famous, pious, and learned man, Rudolph Gualther, who is now the pastor of St. Peter's, in Zurich; at that time he lay in the cradle, so that I have often rocked him. And I attended the school in Our Lady's Cathedral. There was a school-master there called Master Wolfgang Knöwell, from Barr, near Zug, a Master of Arts from Paris, who had been called at Paris *Gran Diabel*. He was a great, honest man, but did not take much care of the school; he looked more where the beautiful maidens were, from whom he could scarcely keep away. I should have liked to study, for I perceived that it was time.

At that time they said that there would come a school-master from Einsiedeln, who before this had been in Luzern, who was a learned man and a good school-master, but cruelly whimsical. So I made for myself a seat in a corner not far from the school-master's chair, and thought: "In this corner you will study or die." Now, when he came and entered upon his work (he went into the school of Our Lady's Cathedral), he said: "This is a nice school" – for it was built only a short time before – "but methinks there are stupid boys, but we shall see; only apply yourself with industry." This I know – that had my life depended upon it, I could not have declined a noun of the first declension. Yet I knew Donatus by heart to a dot. When I was in Schlettstadt, Sapidus had a bachelor, called Georgius "an Andlau," unmarried, a very learned fellow, who worried the Bacchantes so grievously with Donatus that I thought: "If this is such a good book, then I will learn it by heart." And when I learned to read it, I also learned it by heart. This was fortunate for me with the good Father Myconius. For, when he began, he read Terence with us; then we were compelled to decline and conjugate all the words of the entire comedy. Then it was that he often laboured with me so that my clothing became wet with perspiration, yes, even my eyesight dim, and yet he gave me no beating, only once with the back of the hand on the cheek. He also lectured upon the Holy Scriptures; so that many of the laity attended these lectures. For it was just in the beginning of the time that the light of the Holy Scriptures was beginning to arise and yet there remained for a long time the mass and the images in the churches. When he was rough with me, then he took me to his home and gave me something to eat; for he liked to have me relate how I had travelled through all the countries of Germany, and how I had fared everywhere, for at that time I remembered it well. [...]

NOTES

[1] The most elementary Latin grammar, for in all his wanderings as a "student," Platter had learned no Latin – editors.

[2] Martin Bucer (1491-1551), reformer of Strasbourg – editors.

Source of original German text: *Thomas Platter: Lebensbeschreibung*, ed. Alfred Hartmann. 3rd edition, revised and supplemented by Ueli Dill, with an epilogue by Holger Jacob-Friesen. Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2006, pp. 23-61.

Source of English translation: *Thomas Platter and the Educational Renaissance of the Sixteenth Century*, edited and translated by Paul Monroe. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1904, pp. 79-122.

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