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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

by Gottfried Keller

With the advent of summer the hitch-hikers are around again. Alone or in small groups they are waiting by the roadside for good-hearted motorists who are willing to accept them as passengers in their cars.

Some of them hold up neatly printed placards showing destinations they hope to reach while some others have started hiding their sometimes enormous rucksacks and cooking utensils so as not to frighten hesitating car drivers unduly and before they have stopped.

A teacher in the Canton of Lucerne has now had the idea of founding a new firm, which he calls "Contact International". This firm issues, against a fee of approximately £3.50, a new *International Auto-Stopper's Passport*.

This neatly got-up blue and white document is only issued to persons who can produce an officially stamped certificate which shows that the bearer "is not negatively known to the police", has not been criminally convicted and is not known to be addicted to drugs.

It is difficult to say whether this International Auto-Stopper's Passport is much more than a quite expensive new gag. Neither the police nor the two motoring organisations – nor indeed any authorities – have been consulted beforehand.

The Swiss Association of Youth Hostels, who are supposed to distribute application forms for the document, seem to be very sceptical about it and have declared that they are not in any way associated with the new venture. However, the enterprising teacher in the Canton of Lucerne thinks that his passport, once it is widely known, affords protection both to the motorist and the hitch-hiker himself.

It gives, he maintains, the hitch-hiker a new image and shows him to be "trustworthy, polite, open-minded, and of good character and reputation". He recommends that the hitch-hiker should, in addition, carry a so-called "SOS-Certificate" giving all relevant medical data, as well as a written

declaration from the parents showing that they do not object to their offspring trying his or her luck on the road.

As every motorist knows giving lifts to hitch-hikers can be in many ways a rewarding experience, but it can also be a total failure. So much depends on the actual circumstances and on the general impression, state of cleanliness, behaviour, conduct and other qualities of the co-traveller one may, on principle, be prepared to accept in one's vehicle.

Personally I have made a number of good experiences during my motoring career, which I recall with pleasure. On the other hand I remember having a hitch-hiker in my car who turned out to be drunk, smelly, rather aggressive and who also wanted me to "lend" him money before, with great difficulty, I was able to get rid of him.

Overall, if there is room in my car, I think I would rather trust my own judgment than the new International Auto-Stopper's Passport – even though this document may not be totally without any value.

Gottfried Keller

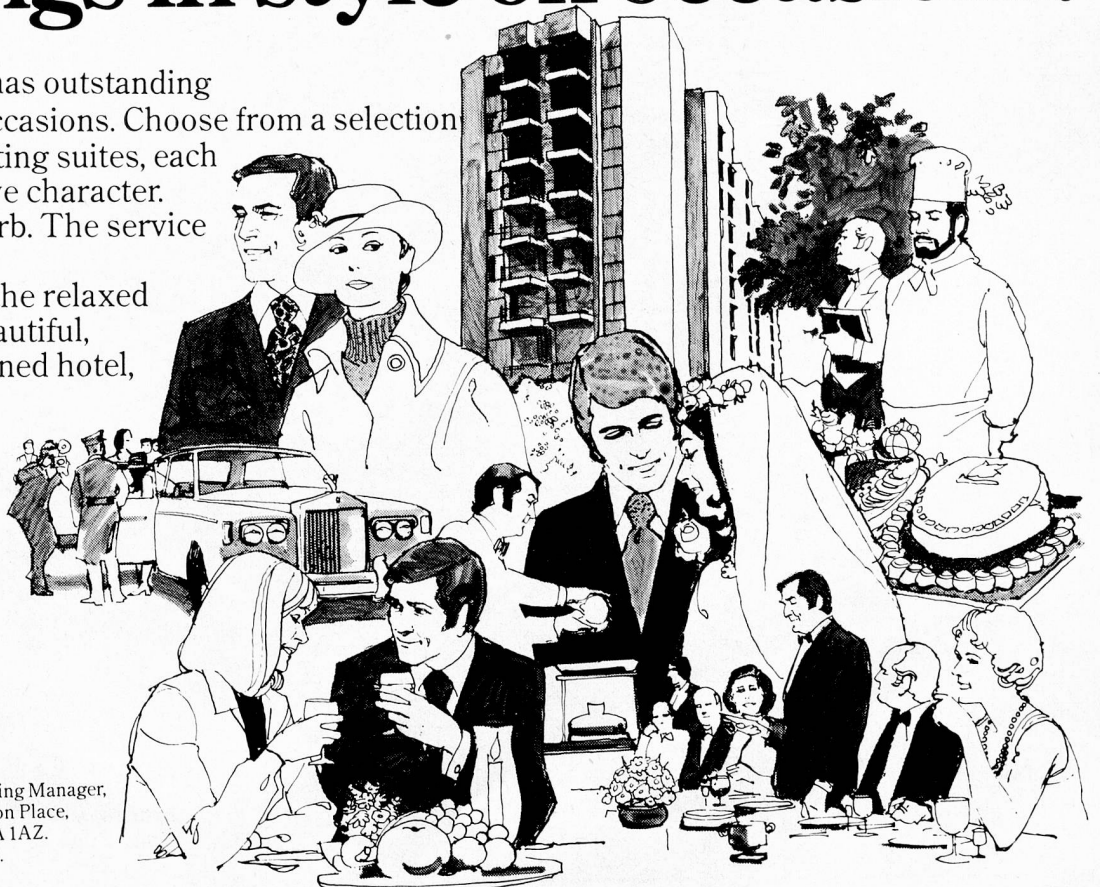
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