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AIR HOP TO ROME

It is due to the undisputed skill of British engineers and technicians that the fastest passenger-carrying aircraft in the world has been built in this country, while B.O.A.C. (British Overseas Airways Corporation) have, as the first civil air line, seen the possibilities of this new machine and put it into regular service.

These remarks refer, of course, to the "Comet", which, during the last few weeks, has become so well-known. The Comet is a very modern and extremely comfortable 36 seater passenger aircraft, which is driven by 4 De Havilland "Ghost" Jet engines. Its top speed is somewhere near the region of 900 Km. per hour, its economical cruising speed between 740 and 800 kilometres per hour, according to the weather conditions prevailing. The "Comet" flies, for various reasons, almost exclusively at heights of 12,000-14,000 metres above sea-level; this altitude automatically turns it into an aircraft of the stratosphere. The interior of the "Comet" is similar to the interior of any modern airliner: very comfortable chairs, little tables on which refreshments are served, a small kitchen, a toilet, electric lights which are adjustable, air conditioning, etc. It goes without saying that an aircraft which climbs to such altitudes has a pressurised cabin.

On May 10th, B.O.A.C. invited a number of representatives of the press of Great Britain, the U.S.A., the Dominions and of many European countries to a demonstration flight to Rome in order to show the extraordinary possibilities and handling qualities of this new venture in civil aviation. Among those who were invited was the Correspondent of the Swiss Tele-

graph Agency. One of the purposes of this trip was to prove that a journey London-Rome-London (twice 1,483 or in total 2,966 Kilometres) in one day constitutes by no means a tour de force. Expressed differently this air-hop meant breakfast in London, lunch in Rome, tea above the Matterhorn and dinner in London.

The start from London Heath-Row took place at 9.39 a.m. At 9.49 a.m. ten minutes later, we were already over the Channel coast at an altitude of 4,200 metres. At 10.21 we saw, through the clouds, the Paris aerodromes of Orly and Le Bourget. At about 11 a.m. we were above Lake Geneva, at an altitude of nearly 14,000 metres and thought that the Léman looked like a small blue banana miles below. At 11.05 a.m. we greeted the giants of Zermatt, while at 11.15 a.m. one saw Pisa and felt that the descent was beginning. At 12 noon our feet were on the soil of the Eternal City at Rome-Ciampino. The total flying time was, to the minute, as checked by means of a very good Swiss watch, 2½ hours. The pilot told us afterwards that he had taken it easy, not wanting to break a record or to strain the engines.

As with every other aircraft, the engines are kept running for quite a while with the "Comet" whilst the aeroplane is stationary on the ground. The noise which the engines make, sounds from without like a very high, penetrating whistle. Inside the aircraft, however, once the door is closed, the noise is perhaps comparable to the sound of the motor of a vacuum-cleaner. This characteristic noise of the jet-engine has already caused the English public to speak of the "Flying tea-kettle", a reference which needs no explanation but speaks for itself. The actual start, with



COMET IN FLIGHT.

engines turning at high revolutions and wheel-brakes being suddenly loosened, is extremely rapid: one has the impression of being hurled forward by a terrific power. After a short run — not longer than on a "Convair" — the ground begins to disappear rapidly; the ascent into high altitudes is so fast, that one often has the same feeling as one has in a lift which goes up at very great speed. As soon as one has reached a certain height, one has the strange impression of hardly moving at all, but of hanging, so to say, freely in space. The earth is, as it were, being reeled off below one, as a geographical map, at slow-motion-picture speed. We had left the wind, the weather and the cloud well below us after 7 minutes and enjoyed glorious sunshine under a deep blue sky, the blue of which becomes deeper and deeper, touching on a purple-black, the higher one climbs. Probably the impression of comparative stillness is derived from the absence of turning airscrews. The forward movement, super-rapid as it is in fact even if one does not have this impression, is completely free of any vibration. To prove this we stood pencils on our tables, as well as coins stood on edge; they remained there and would probably still have stood there when we touched down at Rome, had we not become too tired of waiting for them to topple over.

The sight of Cumulus-clouds seen from such a height is incredibly beautiful: cauliflower after cauliflower drifting along in space. Geneva and Lausanne: tiny little towns out of the toy-box; the three lakes of Neuchâtel, Bienne and Morât like minute pools of water. What a sight the mountains present! Giants, seemingly terrifying and unaccessible from below, become relatively harmless. What a lovely shape the Weishorn, the Dent Blanche, the Zinal-Rothorn have and how majestic the Monte Rosa looks. Though one hardly realises one is moving, this fairy-tale picture of the Swiss Alps disappears only too rapidly. A very short while afterwards, in fact precisely 1 hr. and 38 mins. after the departure from London, one sees the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea. We flew along the coast-line, straight above the deep characteristic bay of Spezia, saw the island of Elba, Lake Thasimeno, then the hills of Rome.

Ciampino: unbearably hot. London still in its fresh glory of green, Rome already dusty and hot. In the Campagna they are already making hay. On the aerodrome one looks — without wanting to be a snob — on the many piston-engined aircraft which come and go nearly as on relics from a past century.

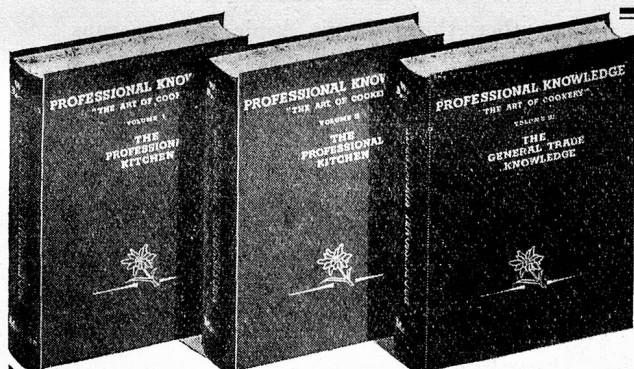
We had 4 hours in Rome. I made use of them for lunch, a sight-seeing tour round the town, a number of small purchases — among them two pounds of wonderful strawberries for the equivalent of threepence — and for writing a few postcards to relations and friends in Switzerland. At 4.45 p.m. we started on the return trip. Again we had an object lesson in geography which could not have been more fascinating: Mediterranean, Italy, Western Switzerland, the Plateau de Langres, the Channel, the Thames Estuary, London — fortunately towards the evening with fewer clouds. The Matterhorn was visible, this time, right down to the Schwarzsee, not only from the Solvay-Hut upwards as on the way out. A tiny, really minute white dot on Lake Geneva showed a steamer was en route from Lausanne to Evian. Somewhere outside Paris the descent begins. We crossed the Channel between Boulogne and Hythe in just under five minutes. At 7.19 p.m. the rubber-stamp of the Immigration Officer at Heath Row confirms that we are back in the United Kingdom. Shortly afterwards one is back at home enjoying the strawberries bought on the market in Rome a few hours previously. One has, in the truest sense of the word, participated in a fascinating air-hop from spring into summer.

B.O.A.C. have, so far, 8 liners of the "Comet" type in their possession. Twenty more are on order, each costing about £500,000, moreover a number of leading foreign airline companies have already placed orders for this type of aircraft, which, no doubt, is the means of air-transport of the future. A "Comet" burns some 500 gallons or 2,250 litres of Kerosene-fuel per flying hour. It is therefore imperative that for regular flights the supply of fuel — which is forced into the wing-tanks under great pressure to expedite refuelling — at various points be secured and well organised.

The advent of the "Comet" has rightly been described by Sir Miles Thomas, Chairman of B.O.A.C. as a memorable and historic event. "A superb product of British invention, enterprise and skill", he said, "this remarkable aircraft, which has already excited intense international attention, marks a new era in aviation history and will in effect halve the size of the world."

As a Swiss and European one would like to wish the "Comet" a glorious career in the service of peace.

Gottfried Keller.



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