

# Address delivered by Dr. E. M. Bircher : At the December meeting of the City Swiss Club

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## ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DR. E. M. BIRCHER.

## At the December Meeting of the City Swiss Club.

I regret that my first duty is to correct some possible misunderstanding. From the invitation you will expect a "talk" which, in the customary English understatement of facts, might well mean a learned discourse or some words of wisdom. — This I cannot do. Your Chairman in his elegant ways just asked me "de dire quelques mots" and, taking him literally, I agreed. I admit my knowledge of French is most inadequate — but, even so, I never dreamt that "de dire quelques mots" would rate a separate mention on the invitation cards. So let me make it clear that what I am trying to say is not a "discours" but only an attempt to put into words some of the thoughts which occupy all our minds at times.

In this seething cauldron of a world where old values disappear, where we are forced painfully and haltingly to reshape things in our minds and hearts, we realise more than before that however happy and content we are in the lands of our adoption, we shall never be completely at home. We share the fate common to all wanderers and exiles that wherever we are one corner of our heart belongs to the country from which we sprang. Sometimes it is pride in the achievements of the motherland, sometimes it is anxiety like for a loved one and sometimes it is sheer agonizing "Heimweh." But whatever shape it may take at any given moment, it is something that stretches beyond self-interest and personal feelings — something that reaches even beyond our individual lives.

A few years ago I met in Canada Christian Ammeter, a man well over 80 years of age. After the Franco-Prussian war he had gone with his two younger brothers to the Caucasus to farm. Rich in 1918, he had lost everything he possessed in the Russian Revolution, and in 1929 he and his sons and daughters and nephews, grandchildren and great-grandchildren — a family of 73 persons — came to the new world and settled south of Winnipeg, where the Bush, and the Prairie Country meet. Few of his children and none of his grandchildren or great-grandchildren had ever seen Switzerland — but they all talked "Baern-tuetsch" as if they only just had left the Oberland. Their one desire was to hear us talk and tell them of the "Heimet" they had never seen. Well do I remember one little lad of eight, who looked long at me and then said "I bi ou a Schwyzer." — They loved our country and its people and were proud to be Swiss. But it was not only sentiment that made them proud, it was a deep and genuine gratefulness. For in their hour of greatest need, when they had lost everything they possessed and had worked for and created with their own hands through three generations of honest toil, the people at home came to their rescue and enabled them to emigrate to Canada to start again. Do you wonder that they held their heads high and were proud to be Swiss? — even the younger ones who had never seen our native land?

We all have at times smiled at these ancient words: "Einer für Alle, Alle für Einen," but is it not just those very ideals of co-operation and service which have been a conscious thought in our country for 650 years which constitute one of our chief characteristics? True, in a thousand and one ways we have failed to live up to those standards, but let us

not forget that our history as well as the present times are full of instances where we did try honestly to put them into practice.

May I remind you of the room in the Exhibition dedicated to our national defence, the room which bore the inscription:

"La Suisse doit se défendre"

"La Suisse peut se défendre"

et "La Suisse veut se défendre."

Do you realize that over one million people or roughly half the adult population of our country is not only organized but ready *and trained* to help in the defence. Who of us was not thrilled to the core by that film "Die wehrhafte Schweiz" which showed with what incredible speed and efficiency the ploughman dons his army coat and goes to man the frontier posts. Let us not deceive ourselves. All this is not the result of mere organisation and decrees and laws which descended on us from a Government — it is the result of the conscious will of a people to live according to the ideals of Co-operation and Service.

This achievement is all the more remarkable when we consider the diversity of race and creed and language with which we had to cope. Truly we need not be ashamed to say that our country has set an example to mankind. It is the spirit of co-operation and service which will overcome this freedom of the jungle which seems to rule the world to-day in the personal, political and economic field. No man and no people can live on the material plane alone and only in as far as we translate our ethical tenets into action do we grow. This very spirit, these ideals, which have grown and been with us for 6½ centuries — they have made Switzerland what she is to-day and given her her strength. And in as far as she holds on to them will she win through the present strife. They, too, are the source where we as individuals can draw strength and to which that corner of our hearts is forever attached — beyond time and generations.

May I tell you of one more picture that comes forever to my mind of late: It was in the early part of 1916. My Battery was billeted in Osogna above Gubiasco. One Sunday afternoon I wandered slowly along the hillside when I came upon a little white-washed house. On a stone bench in front sat an old man, a glass of deep red wine by his side, his hands folded upon a stick, smoking a most disreputable pipe. I sat down beside him and after a while we talked. In simple words he told me of himself. He had been abroad, to Rome, to Egypt, to the United States. He had made good. Then, after happy years, his wife and then his children died, and in his loneliness in foreign lands that corner of his heart that was forever Switzerland had called him home to live once more in the house where he was born. No one depended on him now, so he had left his considerable fortune to his native village and his mother's town Lugano. When after quite a while I asked him if he was content — he stretched his hand in gentle gesture to the snow-capped hills and the valley rich with the promise of spring and said "Que vole di piu" (what more do you want).

Let us hope that when we get to that age where the eternal verities are nearer our grasp, we will have reached that inner serenity, that peace of mind, where from an ever faithful heart we too can point to the hills and valleys and say with my old philosopher friend from Osogna "Que vole di piu."