

Christmas with the Swiss Colony of Manchester

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CHRISTMAS WITH THE SWISS COLONY OF MANCHESTER.

After four years interruption, it was found possible to re-instate the Christmas party in the programme of the Swiss Club. It used to be the most comprehensive gathering of our compatriots in the years before the war, all distinctions being set aside except that of being, or belonging to somebody, Swiss. Its suspension made a void in our communal life; we could ill afford to drop this strong tie between our scattered elements. So, seeing the clouds of danger lifting over this hospitable land and the promise of "Peace on earth and goodwill among men" brought nearer realisation, we felt encouraged to re-instate the Christmas gathering before the other high light in our Swiss calendar, the Grütli-Feier.

A modest afternoon gathering round the tea-tables was timidly envisaged, in the hope that such talents as survive in our midst would adorn the occasion for the enjoyment of young and old. The regime of rations, points and coupons forbids the extravagant indulgences which made people in the hedonistic between-wars time look forward to next Christmas so soon as the last one's indigestion was relieved. The sugar ration and the monthly egg does not run to the making of "Springerli" and "Leckerli" and buying presents would have encouraged the maligned squanderbug. Why have a Christmas tree when there are no "Dürggeli" to hang on its branches and no "Päckli" round its base? So it was decided to make the best of another war-time Christmas without tree and presents.

Somehow Father Christmas heard of this posterous plan and he sent a message saying that his spirit would be cramped, to say the least, at a Christmas party where his symbols are missing and he chided us for degrading a typical Swiss Christmas into an ordinary tea gossip. True to his mystic nature he promised a personal appearance for the enjoyment of the children as well as of the ageing who, the older they grow, think back the more to their own lovely and peaceful childhood days. This good news spread with deserving rapidity and resulted in a cumulation of individual good will. A worthy setting was arranged at the Midland Hotel, whose resourceful manager in his compatriotic enthusiasm overcame all obstacles, regardless of depleted staffs and stores in the midst of a busy season. A few things were "g'funde, g'bettlet, (nid g'stole), g'kauft," little but enough to make neat sweet Päckli in red and white. And to crown all came the offer of a tree and of kind artistic hands to take charge of its decoration with the ample reserves of candles, tinsel and other brilliants saved from pre-war Christmases. Thus a timid suggestion was converted into a real Christmas atmosphere and the party, trickling in on Saturday, 18th December, from near districts and more distant counties soon formed a happy and delighted family gathering.

Our President, Mr. Kubler, to whom we owe the institution of the Christmas party in the annual calendar of our communal life was once again gratified to welcome a large assembly. The proceedings got into swing with the singing of "Stille Nacht" and soon the timidest felt so much at ease that two little ladies of about 6 declaimed their verses and carols with perfect poise. An adapted Hans Andersen tale delighted all and the Huggenberger stories brought a delicious breath of homeland air. The tea was hardly over —

and what a tea it was in variety, excellence and abundance — when a loud knock was heard at the door. Father Christmas, tall, stately and magnificent in ermin trimmed scarlet robe and hood, slightly bent under his weighty bag, was introduced to the singing of "O, du fröhliche". Ponderously he stepped between the tables, stroking his flowing beard with the hand left free by the missing birch rod, bowed to the children and to their awe enquired how they have been behaving since his last appearance. Satisfied, as he said, in a general way on this score he gathered the little ones round him and bade them light the candles on the tree. With a sad reflection that the pinch of the war loaded his sorrows and lightened his purse, he dropped the bag at his feet and dipping into its depths handed out the Päckli until each child had received his or her share and the left-overs gave no less delight to grown-up members of the family. The ladies were enchanted with a length of scarlet silk ribbon, the product of a transplanted Swiss industry. Several special gifts were drawn for by lot, all the luck being on the side of the boys. While some delightful song and piano solos charmed the adults, restless youth found its own delight in tumbling around the tree, whose lights reflected in their sparkling eyes and lit excited blushes on their healthy cheeks.

We have been trying in a few hours to re-live the sweet memories of childhood's happiest festival in the traditional setting of our native land, but fading memory failed to provide the glass of Kirsch which my native village custom requires to be placed on the outer window sill for Father Christmas' restoration. True, he had not to travel through the snow and frost of a wintry Swiss landscape but the poor man, struggling out of his trappings and wiping the sweat from his brow, would have welcomed it all the same. To our children, whose vision of father's and mother's country is largely made-up of occasional glimpses into our native customs and traditions, Mr. Kubler said at the outset, we were trying to provide them with one of those good pictures which Uncle Mac of the B.B.C. recommended them recently to acquire for the adornment of life's walls. Let us hope that it will hang well.

And now, too late to wish you a Merry Christmas, we send to the "S.O." and all our compatriots at home and abroad, good wishes for a Happy New Year and may next Christmas see Peace and Goodwill reign supreme among all men.

P.....P.

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