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UNION HELVETIA CLUB. LE GRAND BAL DES 22 CANTONS.

On arriving at 1, Gerrard Place, the Headquarters of the Union Helvetia, I had not the slightest notion what this famous Ball of the 22 Cantons was going to be like; curiously enough I had never heard before of this event, although I have been told that it was one of the chief events in the Annals of the Union Helvetia Club; to satisfy my curious readers I will state right away that it eventually was a most enjoyable affair.

For me, the evening started with disappointments, the first one being due to the fact that I tried to purchase a Bernese flag from two charming ladies, but as none could be had, I contented myself with simply the Swiss Flag, thus safeguarding myself from any reproach of indulging in what we call at home "Kantönligeist." The second disappointment was, that the affable President, being busy greeting the numerous arrivals, was kept away from the table where I was put as a sort of a show piece; not being exactly an ornament I felt very lonely and forlorn in spite of my two companions who tried hard to cheer me up. Somehow or another I could not even get the usual grin on to my face, and I make a fervent appeal to my friend the President, whenever he invites me again, to come and sit with me and to hold my hand, it would greatly help me to overcome the stage fright from which, in spite of some experience, I still suffer. Perhaps this is asking too much, as a President's duty is manifold, but perhaps I might here ask him a frank question, namely, what dreadful crime have I committed in the past, that not even one Committee member tried to come near me, although I understand that the Club is the happy or perhaps unhappy possessor of a score of Gentlemen who are entitled to wear that pretty badge with which Committee members are adorned; even the energetic and efficient Secretary only favoured me with a passing smile, I feel truly worried about this state of affairs, and some explanation would relieve me from an uneasy mind.

Being what is commonly called a City man, I am perhaps not accustomed to the hours to which my friends of the U. H. are used to, when the hour struck eleven, the time when I usually quit the fireside in order to lay a weary head to rest, a trio of nice ladies accompanied by equally nice Gentlemen, sat down at the hitherto vacant table and things began to get lively, somehow or another my usual "grin" appeared, which coincided strangely enough with the appearance of a few bottles of wine from the old country and the cellar, and when the President of the Swiss Club Birmingham presented me with an exquisite cigar, my face became radiant. —

Meanwhile dancing was in full swing, and the merry laughter, which not even a rather noisy band could drown, would have made the biggest pessimist feel more light-hearted. I could not resist the temptation for long to have a "swing round," although my favourite corn came rather badly through the ordeal.

Helvetia's children were, of course, represented in full force, amongst them a certain Bernese lady, although Bernese by adoption only, (through my interference), she having been born within the sounds of Bow Bells, who with a firm hand guided me with the accompaniment of a lovely valse tune through a maze of happy revelers, then a smiling Appenzellerin hopped with me from one corner to another, making me forget that I ever suffered from lumbago or similar ailments, but when a bewitching little Tessinoise took hold of me I felt in the seventh heaven. Then there was a Solothurnerin who, whilst turning me round at an alarming speed, sang to me of home, country and love, making me feel quite homesick, and frivolous. In the meantime the hands of the clock moved on in an alarming manner towards midnight and yet mother "Helvetia" had not made her appearance, I shyly asked one of the ladies, sitting near me, when this most exalted person was due to arrive, this good lady must have somehow misunderstood me, because her answer was, that she could not come tonight but would try to come next Tuesday; this was rather awkward as I could hardly wait all that time for her arrival, having to fulfill some appointments in the meantime.

Shortly before Big Ben announced that another day was soon to be born, an announcement was made that the "coup" of the evening was approaching and suddenly 22 girls all dressed in white, carrying flags and the escutcheons of the various cantons of the Confederation made their entry, greeted by the tremendous cheers of a company which was tuned up to the fever point of expectation and excitement. To the accompaniment of some lively Swiss tunes they formed a procession. Then the band struck up the Swiss National Anthem and with slow measured steps in walked "Helvetia," it was beautifully stage-managed and caused quite a deep impression on the onlookers. All the twenty-two children of the prolific lady paid their respects, whilst she in turn smilingly acknowledged their tribute. It was a grand moment, and yet I had an insane wish to sing that well-known song about the

"Lorelei" which, of course, had no connection whatsoever with this performance, but somehow the golden locks of "Helvetia" muddled me up, or was it perhaps the "Fendant"?

Then again, the band rose and played the English National Anthem, and all those who sang previously, when Helvetia arrived "God save the King" sang now "Rufst du mein Vaterland" which really did not much matter, as it was the same tune, but never-the-less, it struck me as rather funny. Now when the energetic musicians started to play "Britannia rules the waves," that good-looking lady entered and gave Helvetia and her family a smile, and down went Helvetia and all her offspring on their knees, whilst in the audience various ladies wiped their eyes and blew their noses. After the "blessing" the two principal ladies walked through the Hall accompanied by the 22 standard bearers. I do not know who is responsible for the staging of this display, but whoever it is, I wish to pay a great compliment, everything was beautifully arranged, and not the slightest slip occurred, and the performers rightly earned the applause which was so spontaneously bestowed on them. I do not think they could have done it better at Drury Lane, it was a most impressive affair. After the procession, a Press Photographer took a photo, and I hope some of my readers will have seen a reproduction of this charming group in their Daily paper. Unfortunately I had to leave in order to catch my last train, and therefore could not wait for the handing round of the customary and delicious onion soup, with which the various entertainments at the Union Helvetia Club usually end up; but I am glad I had to leave early because I simply could not have borne to see "Helvetia" sharing a plate of onion soup with "Britannia," it would have spoilt the excellent impression which that memorable evening left behind. ST.

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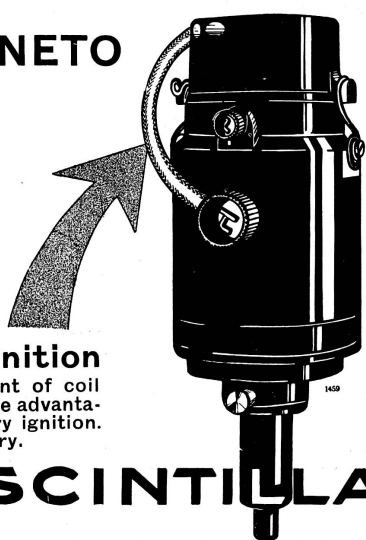
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