

# An untold life story

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## MR. BERNER CONVALESCING

A telephone call to Mr. Willy Berner, now taking the firm of Giron Freres at Accrington into his good care, reassured us of the good health of Mr. *Ermanno Berner*. The Swiss Observer's Northern correspondent is recovering in Italy after a series of three operations. To have sustained them at past 70 is quite some feat and we wish Mr. Berner a complete and speedy recovery.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

**CITY SWISS CLUB.** Dinner with speaker on Tuesday, 19th October (see notice above), Dorchester Hotel. Dr. Frank Ellis, consultant surgeon at Guy's Hospital, will speak on "spare parts surgery". 19th November: *106th Annual Banquet and Ball*.

**NOUVELLE SOCIETE HELVETIQUE.** Open meeting on Thursday, 21st October, at 7.45 p.m. Talk with slides on Mountain Flora by Mr. A. D. Ruscoe.

**SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY.** Monthly meeting on Wednesday, 13th October, at 7.45 p.m.

**SECOURS MUTUELS.** Monthly meeting on Wednesday, 3rd November, at 35 Fitzroy Square.

**SWISS CLUB EDINBURGH.** "Kaffeeklatsch" at Mr. Hansjörg Wirz, 10 Kirk Brae, at 8 p.m.

## CULTURAL EVENTS

Saturday, October 9. Queen Elizabeth Hall. Ballade by Frank Martin included in the programme played by Paul Tortellier (cello) and Maria de la Pau (piano).

Wednesday, October 20th. Wigmore Hall, 7.30 p.m. Recital by the

pianist Bernhard Billeter (eight Preludes by Frank Martin and works by Beethoven, Brahms and Debussy).

Friday, 29th October. Eglise Suisse, 79 Endell Street, W.C.2. Concert in aid of the Swiss Church under the

patronage of the NSH and the European Liszt Centre. Works by Liszt and Bach. L. Rabes at the organ. Other performers include a cellist, a harpist, a soprano and members of the Royal Choral Society. Silver collection.

# AN UNTOLD LIFE STORY

The people with the most interesting lives are not always those who can show the most visible trappings of material success. But then, what is an *interesting* life? The notion of "interesting" is conventional and every life is interesting, even if it is spent in a wheel chair. By that token, who knows the wealth of existence belonging to the old people who come to the Swiss Church, or to any other church for that matter? They have the memory of a story which is never told, not only because it lacks in romantic lustre, but because most of the cast of those who played a role in it have already vanished.

The traditional biography is concerned with a remarkable story of success and romance appealing to the idealism of the reader and inspiring him with a wish of emulation. But such a story pertains more to romanticism and the adventure epic than human truth. The really true biographies should be that of a totally unknown person, the absolute average, one who has never achieved anything worth recording in print.

However, the story of *Mrs. George Herbert*, a frail 85-year-old regular doyen of the Swiss parish in London, is not of this kind, because she has by no means had an "ordinary" existence and is fortunate enough in having a circle of friends who know of it. It is through one of them that I learned that Mrs. Herbert had been Lady-in-waiting to the mistress of Edward VII. This conjured up such a glowing and different chapter of history that I resolved to write her story with her kind permission.

Mrs. Herbert was born in Orvin, in the Jura, in 1886, of a farmer family. She decided at 19 to leave for England, "*pour s'épanouir*" and worked as an "au pair" in an aristocratic family dwelling at Sherborne Castle, with two daughters from whom she learnt English.

In 1914 she entered the service of Mrs. Newhouse, the wife of an American millionaire and one of King Edward VII's last woman friends. Mrs. Newhouse was discreet regarding her five years of association with the then Prince of Wales, and Mrs. Herbert could not therefore enliven this anecdotal chapter of history from any personal angle. All she could say was that Mrs. Newhouse had accompanied the Prince of Wales for many seasons at Baden Baden, had followed him to the Ritz hotels of Paris and other glamorous places, while the life-loving Prince left Princess Alexandra at home, ignoring his Victorian background.

With Mrs. Newhouse, she went to America twice. It was a gay life. In New York, they stayed at the Ritz Carlton, sharing an apartment (for her mistress) and a three-room suite for herself. In the "Lusitania", the ill-fated liner which they took on their westward bound journey, they had a State Apartment.

Mrs. Herbert followed her wealthy mistress across America to Utah, where Mr. Newhouse had started his fortune, and Salt Lake City, where he owned the majestic Newhouse Hotel. There, she had an insight of Mormon life. She visited the Tabernacle and the harem where Brigham Young, founder of the

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new religion, had kept his twelve wives.

As a lady-in-waiting, Mrs. Herbert had to attend to the correspondence, to the wardrobe, to the management of the journeys of her mistress. She kept her company throughout the long travels and remained in her company at the restaurants and pallazos in which they stayed during their stray millionaire wanderings. It was a great life, but, when Mrs. Newhouse decided to set sail for America for the third time (in 1917), Mrs. Herbert declined as she could not face another nerve-racking trans-atlantic journey.

The previous trip had been terrible, with passengers spending a week in their lifebelts under the stress of always imminent alerts. By 1917 the "Lusitania" had been sunk and the submarine war was raging. Thus Mrs. Herbert left her mistress with regret after three years of service and attachment.

For the next five years she worked in *haute couture* as a model and saleslady in the business of *Marthe Dion* in Dorset Street. It was during that time that she married with a lawyer with chambers at Lincoln's Inn, Holborn. With the experience gained at *Marthe Dion*, she opened her own salon in the opposite block. The proximity to her former employer and the contacts established during her experience were helpful in making her own business known to the haute couture public. A single insert in the "Times" informing readers that she had opened shop in Dorset Street was enough to trigger the first customers. From then on, the shop thrived on a clientèle attracted through recommendation and in 1928 Mrs. Herbert opened a full-size shop, with a complete staff of sales ladies, models and dressmakers in Knightsbridge.

Tailoring in the pre-war years was a more lucrative undertaking than it is today. Mrs. Herbert worked for the aristocracy. There was still an aristocracy to speak of and it represented the main market for dresses made to measure. The profession has been made progressively more difficult with the decline of this aristocracy and its habits, with the diminutions of large fortunes and the relative improvement of industrially confected dresses.

Nowadays, complains Mrs. Herbert, only the women with impossible configurations have their dresses tailor made. Marks and Spencers, Lafayette and other similar big businesses, have taken over the work of the haute couture salon. Before the war, there were many highly successful French tailors in London. The depression and the air raids were enough to drive them nearly all back to the Continent.

Mrs. Herbert well knew the world of tailoring. She used to travel to Paris at the seasonal opening of every new

fashion. She dealt with the Paris houses of *Paquin*, *Martial et Armand* among others. In London, she knew the Royal Family's tailor, Hartnell, and considers that our present Queen is very well dressed—with a small reservation as to the good taste of her hats, however. For Mrs. Herbert, the Edwardian era and the pre-war days were better than today, not only as regards tailoring, but also in the general quality of life. But which elderly person does not feel that way?

The war disrupted Mrs. Herbert's business. Her shop in Knightsbridge was bombed. She sold what she could and engaged in the Women's Voluntary Service—an organisation in which she is still active today. Like so many parents, she had to undergo the anxiety of having a boy in the RAF. Nothing would stop her son from going in the air force. At 19 he went out on his first mission. In the three years before he was shot down over Holland he had been promoted to the rank of squadron leader, had been awarded a Distinguished Air Medal and had carried out over 300 raids. His crew was credited for having destroyed the German battleship "Sharnhorst", anchored in Brest, in broad daylight.

But in 1943, when he had been 21 for only three weeks, he was shot down over Holland. For the following two years the Herberts kept faith and hoped that he had been detained as a prisoner. But when his fellow airmen emerged from the prison camps to tell the tale to the Herberts, they knew that all hope was lost.

This boy had been the joy of their life and Mrs. Herbert still speaks of him with watery eyes. A moving detail which evokes so much of the lost romance of the air war was his great love with an English girl with whom he became engaged shortly before his death. They were made absolutely for each other, recalls Mrs. Herbert. And for the girl it was such a unique and sublime experience that she refused all subsequent proposals of marriage and remains, at 46, a maid for whom no daily and earthly union can replace the memory of past love.

Mrs. Herbert has now been a widow for seven years. She has kept her apartment off Abbey Road, although it is far too large for her, and lives more comfortably than many of the aged doyens of the Swiss Church. She is seen regularly on Sundays although she finds it difficult to hear what is being said in the pulpit.

Her life must surely have similarities with the lives of many Swiss girls who came to England before the first world war to remain there. But she must surely be one of the last ones still there to tell her story.

(PMB)

## SWISS CHURCH

SERVICES EN FRANCAIS: à l'Eglise Suisse, 79 Endell Street, W.C.2, tous les dimanches à 11h15 et 19h00.

SAINT-E-CENE: le premier et troisième dimanche du mois, matin et soir.

PERMANENCE: chaque jeudi de 15h00 à 18h00.

REUNION DE QUARTIER: huit veillées en automne et au printemps: voir "Le Messager".

CLUB DES JEUNES: tous les dimanches de 12h00 à 22h30, tous les jeudis de 15h00 à 22h30.

REUNION DE COUTURE: le 2e mardi du mois.

LUNCH: tous les dimanches à 13h00.

VISITES: sur demande.

PASTEUR: A. Nicod, 7 Park View Road, London, N.3. Téléphone 01-346 5281.

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SERVICES IN GERMAN: at Eglise Suisse, 79 Endell Street, W.C.2, at 10 a.m. At John Southworth Centre, 48 Gt. Peter Street, S.W.1 at 6.30 p.m.

HOLY COMMUNION: every first Sunday of the month at evening service only. On major feasts at morning and evening services.

CONSULTATIONS: every Wednesday 4-6 p.m. at Eglise Suisse.

DISTRICT GROUPS W.4 and S.E.21) and SERVICES OUTSIDE LONDON: see "Stimme".

SERVICES IN ENGLISH: every fourth Sunday at 7.30 p.m.

"KONTAKT" (Youth Group): every Wednesday 4-10 p.m. at Eglise Suisse. Supper at 6.30 p.m. Programme at 8 p.m.

SWISS Y.M.C.A.: see Forthcoming Events.

WOMEN'S CIRCLE: every first Tuesday of the Month.

MOTHERS' REUNION: 3rd Wednesday in the Month, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

VISITS: by request.

MINISTER: Pfr. M. Dietler, 1 Womersley Road, N.8. Telephone 01-340 6018.

SWISS CATHOLIC MISSION: at St. Ann's Church, Abbey Orchard Street (off No. 25 Victoria Street), S.W.1.

SATURDAYS: Ecumenical Service at 6.30 p.m.

SUNDAYS: Holy Mass at 9 and 11 a.m. (in English). At 6.30 p.m. (mostly in German).

CONSULTATIONS AND CONFESSIONS: preferably on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays in the afternoon or by appointment.

SERVICES EN FRANCAIS: Notre Dame de France, 5 Leicester Place, W.C.2, on Suns, at 9, 10, 11 a.m. 12.15, 6, 7 p.m.

SWISS CATHOLIC YOUTH CLUB — Meeting every Sunday after Evening Mass (8-11 p.m.) Discussions, dance, lectures with members of other denominations at John Southworth Centre, 48 Gt. Peter Street, S.W.1.

CHAPLAIN: Paul Bossard, St. Ann's Church, Abbey Orchard Street, S.W.1. Tel.: 01-222 2895.