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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

by Gottfried Keller

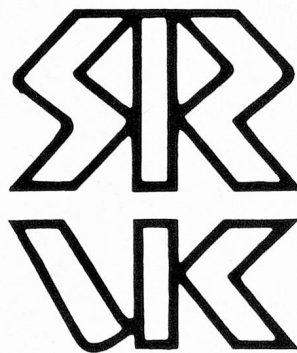
FEDERAL ELECTIONS

December 5th, 1979 was Election Day in Berne. A new Federal Councillor had to be found to succeed the retiring Chief of the Military Department, Mr. Gnaegi. Well over 800 Grisonais had taken an extra train to Berne, in the expectation that the Grisonais Mr. Leon Schlumpf would be elected. He was. Quite triumphantly. His political party, the SVP or Swiss Peoples Party, had done the extraordinary thing to put forward a double proposal for the combined parliamentary chambers' choice. One was Mr. Schlumpf, lawyer, Councillor of States and ex- Mr. Price-Watcher and the other was a member of the Cantonal Government of Berne and National Councillor, Mr. Werner Martignoni. The former had the advantage of already being a nationally known, popular figure, whereas the latter's name had only cropped up during the last

few weeks. As it turned out, he proved to be an extremely fair fighter as well as a superbly good loser, disappointed though he must have been.

The Swiss Peoples Party's claim to a seat in the Federal Government was never disputed, since this political organisation participates in the so-called magic formula of "two plus two plus two plus one" for the composition of the Federal coalition government. (Two liberal democrats, two Christian democrats, two social democrats and one representative of the Swiss Peoples Party.) With Mr. Martignoni's defeat a Taboo of 150 years standing has, incidentally, at last been broken: a tradition, which is *not* anchored in the Constitution, that the two most heavily populated Cantons, namely Zürich and Berne, should always have a representative inside the Federal Council. Apparently some people in Berne are, at the moment, a little sour — while the Grisonais are jubilating — but this will, no doubt, wear off.

Just before the election of the new man the routine re-election of the six Federal Councillors who intended to remain in office took place. This is always a kind of popularity test. Some, like Messrs. Huerlimann and Honegger, did very well, while some others like Mr. Chevallaz (Finances) and Aubert (Foreign Affairs) did considerably less so. Foreign Secretary Aubert came out bottom of the poll — a fact which was interpreted afterwards as a kind of demonstration against Aubert's new foreign policy of "dynamism". It was not, it was generally agreed, an expression of dislike of his amiable personality. He himself thought that the Swiss in general were not really interested in foreign affairs, an explanation which may, to a certain extent be true. But very probably the many abstentions and votes for somebody else — 122 of them out of 246! — were meant as a warning against too many journeys abroad. The Swiss do not really like their Highest Magistrates to be busybodies.



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