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II.

In his "Ce qu'en pense Potterat" ("What Potterat thinks about it") M. Benjamin Valloion has done two things well. He has projected his own feelings for Switzerland and his thoughts about the Great War into the person of David Potterat, ex-commissary of police, and in doing so has created a very vivid and lovable personality; and in the second place he has shown the difficulty of the task laid upon the Swiss Federal Council of steering a neutral state of mixed races and divided sympathies through the perils of a European war.

David Potterat, now verging on the sixties, is a man of comfortable habit of body, euphonic, expansive, and genial of temperament, and with an engaging twinkle in his eye. After more than thirty years of honourable service as guardian of the peace of Lausanne he now finds his greatest joy in cultivating his garden. The skill with which he had formerly tracked the lawbreaker is now exercised upon caterpillars and other garden pests. "The Alps to the left of me," he says, the Jura to the right, the lake in front, the sun up above, a garden and I in the midst of it, what more can one desire?" He held that man is not destined to live in a six-storey tenement. To achieve happiness he must touch the earth with his two feet, dip his hands into spring water, lean his ladder against his plum-tree, and digest his own vegetables.

Being eminently sociable and finding his wife and little son Carlo a somewhat unresponsive audience, he often foregathers with his cronies at the café, where he inveighs against strikes, the cost of living, Socialism, feminism, and the Sunday circulation of motors. He is no slave to newspaper propaganda but forms his own opinions, reading between the lines and interpreting silences. "When an Emperor visits his clients," he says, "distributing clocks and tie-pins, it is just as when the lion-tamer with his lumps of sugar proposes to make his animals work. Then it is time to be on one's guard!"

When the care of the garden proves too heavy a task for his single-handed labours he takes Belisarius into his household—Belisarius, the "spoiled child of the police," the "lyrical tippler," just culled for vagrancy for the thirty-second time. With all his faults, Belisarius is as gentle as a child, and under Potterat's humane treatment he proves a willing worker and also a reverent listener in the intervals of horticulture. It is to him that Potterat delivers himself of his ideas on religion. "Religion is a ticklish affair nowadays, Belisarius. If you preach hell-fire you frighten the people. If you tell them they are all saved, well and good. But if you mix the two points of view they are bewildered. We must have religion, but the point is how to present it. One for all, all for one—death—resurrection—judgment; yes, but a judgment not too discouraging, something comfortable, in which one can state one's case and plead extenuating circumstances. On the other hand, if you preach perfection, your words fall on deaf ears, for we all know what life is. There are times when you have to humour your clients, to use a little diplomacy. To attract the people you must have a democratic religion. What's your opinion, Belisarius?" But his listener proved to be neutral on the subject of religion, both in regard to doctrine and to the frequentation of assemblies!

Potterat's social activities were not confined to the café. He was the leading spirit with his bugle in a harmonic club that met for practice in his own house, and at which Belisarius assisted with the ocarina. And who more enthusiastic than he in those excursions by steamer to the beauty spots on their lake, ending in an open-air meal, that the Lausannoise love to make? It was on such occasions that his expansive patriotism, stimulated by the generous local wine, found expression in an eloquent after-dinner speech. As he said himself, "J'ai le coup pour les toasts."

It was a heavy day for Potterat when Mauser, the speculative builder, invaded his Eden and after a sharp struggle forced him to move into a tenement house. Mme. Potterat, who, like Mrs. Boffin, was something of a "high-flyer" after the fashions of the day, greeted the change with undisguised joy. Little Carlo saw a prospect of a larger circle of playmates. Belisarius had already succumbed to an attack of pneumonia, and Mi-fou, the cat, disappeared during the removal. "He had a heart," said Potterat, by way of epitaph, "rather than live in a barracks he threw himself under a tramcar. *Requiescat in pace!*" Potterat's philosophy, however, soon came to his aid, and the humanity with which he had formerly tended his fruit trees was now exercised upon his humbler and weaker neighbours. He began to realise, too, the futility of his protests against the spirit of the age. The cinema, he now found, was the revelation of an epoch. "Now I can better understand the folly of the world," he said after his first visit to one. "Formerly we used to be living beings, but now we are all puppets of the cinematograph." He even took a mild interest in football, automobiles, and aeroplanes, and was responsive to Carlo's ambition to "loop the loop."

Towards the end of July, 1914, his talks in the café centred on the menace of a European war. He found it a bad sign that the monarchs were already mobilising God. "I tell you," he said to his listeners, "God is Swiss: He is neutral by definition." His indignation at the violation of Belgian neutrality knew no bounds, and he was among the foremost to offer hospitality to Belgian refugees. He and his wife applied for two little orphans, but the bureau sent them an aged couple from Ostend who proved quite impervious to all the Potterat's attempts at consolation, though they were grateful for their unweary kindness. "Monsieur Potterat, vous êtes un brave homme" was the burden of the poor old refugees' song.

No one was more active than Potterat in attendance at the station on the arrival of a train-load of refugees. The family wardrobe was depleted, and in the pocket of every garment that he took to the train Potterat would put a scrap of paper with the words: "Courage, sympathy, condolence!" "If you read articles in the papers," he said to a refugee, "vinegary articles, just turn the page. The Swiss people—those who take the time by their watches and not by clocks worth 15,000 francs—they are here on the platform with their hearts and their indignation."

After the issue of the report of the Belgian Commission of Enquiry the vials of Potterat's wrath were poured not only upon the authors of the sufferings of Belgium but upon the Swiss Federal Council, which had laid an embargo on the free expression of opinion. Potterat was of La Suisse Romande, whose sympathies were almost entirely with the Allies, but the Federal Council had to act for the whole Confederation, 70 per cent. of which is German by race and largely German in sympathy, and to preserve their country from internal schism they issued a decree that "whoever publicly, whether in speech or in writing, expresses hatred or contempt for the ruler or government of a foreign state is liable to six months' imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 francs." Only the remonstrances of his wife saved Potterat from incurring these dire penalties, and he had to be content with exhaling his wrath and playing the Belgian national airs within his four walls. At last, however, he found a means to give expression to his pent-up feelings. After a visit to the station to administer gifts and consolation to a trainload of blinded soldiers he returned home, and in the silence of the night composed three letters—one to Marshal Joffre, then the hope of the Allied forces, another to the King of the Belgians, and the third to the Swiss Federal Council, took them to the post, and retired to rest in the early hours of the morning with a sense of infinite relief. For the next few days he woke at six every morning with the cry: "Up, the neutrals!" but one morning the usual cry was not heard, and Madame Potterat, hastening to his bed, found he had passed away in his sleep. His funeral was almost a public event. All the societies of which he had been the leading spirit were represented in the procession, and the flowers—from the wreath sent by his old colleagues of the police down to the little bunch from the concierge's little lame boy—testified to the respect and affection in which he had been held. "We shall not see his like again," said his old friend Bigarreau, "It was the war that killed him; he lived through it with all his heart and soul. If ever there was a true citizen it was David Potterat."

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