

City Swiss Club

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NEWS FROM THE COLONY

CITY SWISS CLUB ANNUAL BANQUET AND BALL

Habituates of the City Swiss Club's annual banquet and ball readily agree that this year's occasion was particularly successful.

As usual, the evening began with a friendly, warming-up reception, following which we entered into the spacious ballroom of the familiar Dorchester Hotel. The hall was rather cool and ladies felt cold in the shoulders. The meal was delicious, as expected, beginning with *Le Velouté Germiny aux Croûtons* (soup) and ending with *La Marquise de Framboises Valeri* (ice-cream).

After toasting to the Queen and *La Suisse*, we were given permission to smoke; the time had come for the night's speakers to express themselves.

Mr. Alfred Kuhn, President of the City Swiss Club, welcomed his Excellency, the Ambassador et Madame René Keller, and Lord and Lady Hirschfield, guests of honour for the evening. He thanked the Embassy for all the moral support it was giving to the Club and praised the efforts of Messrs. L. Ackermann, Lucien Jobin and Eddy Tobler in furthering its activities. Finally, he introduced Lord Hirschfield, F.C.A., who, he said, was a man invested with the best qualities of the Gnomes of Zurich, namely, knowing how to look after other people's money.

The Ambassador began his address by thanking his hosts for their lavish hospitality towards him on this, his second Annual Banquet and Ball. He told us that he would refrain from talking on serious subjects — Common Market, revaluation of the Swiss franc, neutrality and such like — but strike a light note by speaking on the delicate problem of honorary awards to Swiss citizens. Honouring the "Swiss Observer", he mentioned a stumbling article I had written a few issues ago, called "Persuing the Federal Constitution", and read out the gist of Article 12 presented therein, forbidding all Swiss civil servants and soldiers to accept any foreign decoration. The Ambassador had assisted to the award of the M.B.E. to a Swiss woman, Miss Schnyder, of the Riverside Home in Huntingdon, for her services to mentally and physically handicapped children earlier the same day and this had set his mind on the topic. But Miss Schnyder was not a man, nor a soldier, and the Swiss Government had not objected to the award. Swiss male citizens on the other hand get into all sorts of trouble if they accept a foreign decoration and Monsieur Keller had personally experienced the fact when, at

the end of the war, the American State Department decided to acknowledge his war-time services by giving him a silver symbol plate. He very quickly received a terse, disciplinary message from the Political Department, establishing the projected award of a silver symbol plate, reminding the prospective recipient that it was forbidden for him to accept such objects, warning him that if he accepted the symbol plate he should leave the service, informing him that if he refused it he would be allowed to retain his post and recover the symbol plate on his retirement. In the meantime it would be entrusted to the Federal Archives in Berne. Monsieur Keller faced the situation with stoicism and parted for the time with the silver symbol plate. Other diplomats had it far worse, he said, especially those assigned to Arab kingdoms, forced to relinquish the gleaming Patek Philippe watches they customarily received. That gave a great deal of work to the people in the Federal Archives, who, overburdened with so much outlawed silverware, must be using a lot of public money in keeping it shiny around the year.

As a consequence of this puritanical policy, Swiss Ambassadors had to make a show of themselves at Buckingham Palace receptions with their shamefully barren lapels. The Americans and the Turks were in somewhat the same plight since they were not entitled to carry foreign decorations; but at least they were allowed to accept them.

When Monsieur Keller was in office in Paris, he used to receive occasional calls from enquirers in the Quai d'Orsay wanting to know particulars about the worthy Swiss they wished to honour with French decorations. Is he 60? was the vital question. Indeed, everybody knows that every Swiss is, or was till recently, a soldier up to the age of 60. The favourite trick practised when the candidate was a bit too young was to send him to a doctor, who issued him with a medical certificate assuring whom it could concern that the candidate was quite incapable of doing any more military service, and this is how he finally got his medal. He thus no longer had to blush about his virgin button-hole and enjoy equality of treatment with Frenchmen, who, as craftsmen in the field, make a point of being present where the decorations are distributed rather than where they are supposed to be deserved.

After the Ambassador's address had received a well-deserved applause, Lord Hirschfield rose to tell us his

attachment to Switzerland, to which he first journeyed some 45 years ago with his father, who was in the textile trade. Lord Hirschfield had just returned from Latin America and he kindly pretended that the sceneries of Mexico and Caracas did not surpass in splendour the greatness of the Swiss Alps. Lord Hirschfield spent many years of his youth at St. Moritz. Lenzerheide, Klosters, Davos were names which all roused great memories. He practised sports, and particularly ice-hockey in the heydays of the Kniesturm team. He told us that he held with pride his first bank account in the Graubundener Cantonal Bank but that he'd forgotten its number. He praised Swiss industry, jibed Swissair and the Swiss Navy, marvelled at the pleasures of buying trousers at a Geneva tailoring-store where the salesgirl measured the length of the inside of his legs (both of them, in fact, just in case there was any asymmetry), sneered at the £50 allowance, booed the gnomes of Zurich but bludgeoned the dwarfs of London, established that Britain had a debt to pay back to the gnomes, discovered that increased productivity was necessary but proved in a prolonged and subtle argument that there were only two producers in the whole of the U.K. His address was sprinkled with cracks and the attendance will remember Lord Hirschfield as one of the funniest after-dinner speakers ever.

He received his loud share of applause and the dancing got started. At the same time, pretty lassies were capering around with their tombola baskets. Quite a precedent, this tombola. The tickets were rolled-up so that we could not see whether they had a number or not. Only the numbered tickets won prizes, waiting on a large table and tagged with the portentous number — a bottle of scotch, a 1910-model handbag, a £50 cheque or, the first prize, a trip to Venice and the Mediterranean. The total value of the prizes, all given by the Swiss business community of London, was £1,500. The tombola raised £500. The jogging on the dance floor was interrupted after an hour, so that the ventriloquist hired for the occasion could talk to his puppets. After some hilarious minutes, dancing was resumed and continued till past one o'clock.

The 104th Annual Banquet and Ball was a great success. Let us hope that the 105th will be as successful and that we shall be having as witty after-dinner speakers.

(PMB)