

77th fête suisse

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77th FÊTE SUISSE

at

CENTRAL HALL, WESTMINSTER

on

THURSDAY, JUNE 12th, 1952

Under the Presidency of

MONSIEUR HENRY DE TORRENTÉ

Ministre de Suisse



A. RENOÜ.

President: "Fête Suisse" Committee

The "HOUSE FULL" boards did not go up at Central Hall, Westminster on the evening of Thursday, June 12, for the "Fête Suisse", this year in its 77th edition. Losers were entirely those who stayed away for reasons better known to themselves, for the 1300 or so people who put in an appearance were amply recompensed for their pains, the function itself being up to standard. To say this is not to underrate, but to praise as this annual event has set a high standard over many years. Indeed, if the dwindling numbers of the London Swiss colony were ever to hold a referendum to decide which function to keep while jettisoning all the others, we have no doubt that the Fête Suisse will receive a unanimous, hearty Aye. And rightly so, for more than any other Colony get-together the Swiss Tea, as it is sometimes called, belongs to the London Swiss tradition. Is there any Swiss here or at home who does not occasionally let his thoughts linger on memories of carefree hours agreeably spent at the Caxton Hall, or as now at the Central Hall, gaily decorated with flowers and bunting, with Federal Cross and Cantonal emblems, amidst a throng of compatriots hailing from the four corners of the Fatherland, of the charming souvenir sellers, of the press at the tea counters, of the unforgettable Pasteur Hoffman-de Visme with his cowbell, of our Minister's stirring speech, of the playing and the singing by both amateur and professional and *in fine* of the greetings from the distant homeland brought by some distinguished personality? These are but a few random reminiscences (our own recollections go back only over a quarter of a century) of an event which the leaflet reminded us first took place in 1864 thanks to the happy initiative of Pasteur Petavel of the *Eglise Suisse*.

The tradition that our "Romand" compatriots thus established has been carried on by them (save for the interruptions of two World Wars), the dynamic Mr. A. Renou having taken over since last year from his fellow "Vaudois" Carlo Chapuis.

Our English friends present could not but admire the richness of the Helvetic heritage. While the function was pervaded with typical Gallic *élan*, its success would have been less sure but for alemannic method, as exemplified by the Schmid family's efficient

tea service, and for the touch of the nostalgic "canzonette ticinesi".

The high light this year was doubtless the choir "La Chanson du Rhône" for the first time in England. They were fully equal to the reputation with which they came to us after their successes at home and in France in their relatively short career. The ladies especially impressed by their attractive Sunday costume of the Vallée d'Anniviers, and their captivating smiles. The black dress of heavy material, with black felt hat, under which protruded white hood with French lace edge, brightly coloured silk aprons and neckerchief set off with their grace and charm. The men, good looking and sharp featured wore simple attire the pom-poms, in the Valaisan colours, of their necktie catching the eye. In bearded conductor, M. Jean Deatwyler, we recognized the real artist, whose sole aim is to make his country, his Canton and its river, his people and his wine, live in the songs, and dances he has himself composed, and conducted with rare sensitiveness. Not a wrong note, the most perfect harmony of voice and instrument. We counted 12 ladies, and 12 gentlemen, 3 clarinets and a bassoon. These last instruments were entirely subordinate to the singing and used here and there strategically to blend the voices perfectly. To say that their performance was perfect, an artistic enjoyment, is but to state the obvious for these Valaisans had the audience completely at their mercy from the time they came on to the platform, the wind-instruments and drums playing, until they disappeared again in a roar of applause. But more later.

Punctual as a Swiss watch, our Minister arrived at 6 o'clock, with Madame de Torrenté and members of the Legation staff. The organ, played by Mr. A. Carver, gave out a short prelude. The patriotic tone of the evening was set by a Group of three accord-eonists, under the leadership of Mr. A. Gandon, playing the well known tunes that fall so easy on the ear. Contrary to the programme which called for the National Anthem, the whole audience rose and sang, with organ accompaniment, the Swiss Psalm. We fumbled with our own copy, to find the new Italian verses for this foremost patriotic hymn, but unlike previous years, they had been omitted this time.

Our Minister, M. Henry de Torrenté, then walked on to the centre of the platform, followed by the Rev. Spörri and the president of the Comité de la Fête Suisse, M. Renou. The latter in an impromptu address welcomed the guests, the Swiss Minister and Mme. de Torrenté, the Legation and Consular staffs, the Press, with a special word for our contemporary the "Journal de Genève", and Mlle. Alice Briod, the directrice du Secrétariat des Suisses à l'Étranger "an old and understanding friend" he voiced the general regret for the absence, through illness, after 30 years of Mr. E. P. Dick the able conductor of the Swiss Male Choir and the now alas defunct Swiss Orchestral Society. M. Renou had a special greeting for the "Chanson du Rhône" choir, their conductor M. Daetwyler and their President, M. Monnier and then called on the newly arrived Pfarrer Spörri to lead the prayer "in Schwyzerdütsch so that we could all understand!" Our spiritual leader put his finger on the spot when he called the present situation a confidence crisis, distrust in the future and in mankind, and we were much comforted by his entreaty that we should re-acquire our spiritual poise by trust in God.

Applause greeted M. de Torrenté when he rose to make his speech. Our envoy commenced by saying that, as done two years ago, he would recall to us some of the past history of the London Swiss Colony from documents that had come to hand, partly burnt when our Legation suffered War damage. No sooner there was Swiss in London, there were three societies: the "Société des Suisses", the "Nouvelle Société des Suisses" and the "Société des Genèveois", which merged in 1718, just as the Primitive Cantons had done, to become the "Société unie des Suisses". The Deed solemnizing the merger bears some resemblance to the 1291 Pact for it begins; "La Providence Divine, ayant conduit dans cette Ville de Londres, un assez

grand nombres de Personnes de notre Patrie . . . ils ont considéré, qu'étant unis ensemble, il s'en formerait un plus avantageux, pour chacun des Membres, qui le composeraient et que cela contribuérat même plus efficacement à cimenter une parfaite Union parmi eux." The Rules were based on Christian principles, all proceedings beginning with a special prayer which was almost a profession of faith. Catholics were at first excluded, but this was not surprising, as M. de Torrenté pointed out, for were not these the days of the battles of Vilmorgen and of the alliance of the Protestant Cantons with the United Kingdom? This restriction was later removed. The Society in the course of the 18th century had many ups and downs: members left it noisily, others were expelled for "enormous crimes". Wealthy compatriots were courted, and their memory honoured if they made donations. Irregularities with the funds were not unknown. In May, 1729, there was 57½ guineas in the Cash Box, in June 52½ only "without it having been opened" so stated the minutes; action taken, the lock was changed! The Society had difficulties with doctors. It is recorded that one Gédéon Ardin des Begnins complained that Dr. Membrini had threatened to pass him by the sword for refusing a loan, and the same practitioner later wounded the President in a duel. In 1736 a doctor bequeathed the Society the cure for gravel; this was sold to a Göttingen medical man, the Church poor and the Minister sharing in the profit. The Society was not to be imposed upon; one Zimmermann having expressed the wish to become President, it was decided he never would. At all times its relations with the "Eglise" were excellent, but in 1790 the Pasteur requested the Committee to exhort members to attend the anniversary sermon. Both were rivals for the custody of the Colour given by George II to the London Swiss who had offered him 500 men to repulse Bonnie



Prince Charlie. This relic now hangs at the Legation. Not only did the "Société" succour its own members but sent generous donations such as £100 given to the Swiss victims of the Paris Siege. There was an elaborate system of fines: 2/6 for absence at meetings, double for President and Treasurer—the same penalty being inflicted on members leaving the United Kingdom without giving notice. From the foregoing our Minister concluded that the difficulties Societies meet are not new, and quoted from the Rules of 1758: "Nous finissons ces règlements comme nous les avons commencés, en priant Dieu qu'il fasse prospérer notre Société pour Sa gloire et pour notre commune consolation." Before terminating M. de Torrenté alluded to the efforts at present being made in the Colony for the establishment of a Swiss Youth Centre, under the leadership of Dr. Egli.

Scarcely had the applause died down, which had thanked our Minister for having led us on a pleasant excursion into the past of the London colony, than on to the stage walked the evergreen members of the Swiss Male Choir, this evening under the leadership of Mr. Ross. While the years have made gaps in their ranks and put more than a sprinkling of grey on many a brow, the quality of their harmony, and their spirit never falter. Just to prove it they sprang a surprise on us. In between a sonorous "Und drüber sang die Nachtigall" by Wengert and a stirring "Jäger Abschied" (Mendelsohn-Bartholdi) one of their numbers sat at the piano and yodel-ed most ably in French and German; this pleased the audience who gave Mr. Luterbacher a hearty ovation.

By way of contrast our "Männerchor" were followed by the uncertain footsteps of the "Eglise Suisse" Sunday school children, this year dressed-up for an ambitious little sketch under the direction of the Rev. F. Kubler. One keen drummer, two foot nothing, had to be escorted back from a mis-timed entry, while the king reclined most royally upon the throne, with crown, but minus orb and sceptre; as for the Princess at the window, whom the soldier successfully wooed, she was just sugar and spice. "Bravo, les enfants."

As the well-known notes of "Sur le Pont d'Avignon" died away, the "Chanson du Rhône" made their impressive entry. We liked the way their conductor prefaced each item with a few words, but this was hardly necessary as the perfection of the singing more than illustrated the subject of the song. They opened with "Le pays du soleil", and followed on with the "chanson des cigales" reminiscent of our Southern valleys. A soloist took us high up in the "chant du pâtre", whilst the "Litanies paysannes" with the Slay-like cadence took your reporter back to a song evening among Baltic D.Ps. in Germany. Sheer art captivated all in "Chado" a prayer in the Anniviers dialect: "oh, make my husband not so beautiful!" Brief and crisp was the "sortie d'église". It is wise to eschew superlatives, but we feel that here we must say that this contribution alone made the 77th Fête Suisse a notable event, a real piece of folklore, and for us a gift from Switzerland. With gracious gesture the ladies of the choir on leaving the stage threw their bunches of 'Alpenrosen' to the audience.

In the interval that followed we found the smaller numbers a great assistance in enjoying our strawberry tea, and circulating among friends; evidently no ill wind.

And thus fortified we resumed our seat to see the Corale dell'Unione Ticinese make their bow, no doubt with their tongue in their cheek wondering what might be their reception after the flawlessness of the previous number. The public soon showed that it appreciated their moral courage and underlined each song with hearty applause. As the "chef du Comité" had said, the "Ticinesi" brought the sun, their care-free, spontaneous singing was soon tugging at our heartstrings. There were old numbers, and new numbers beautifully done such as "Paesanella, quando scendi dai tuoi monti ti sorridono le fonti!" No small wonder then that, despite the injunction at the foot of the programme that there would be no encores, the Corale and their genial conductor, Mr. Peter De Maria, were re-called to the footlights by general acclamation; we would be untrue if we did not remark that we missed their signature tune, "Ciau".

With some announcements Mr. Renou read out a telegram of good wishes which the "Chanson de Lausanne" sent their rivals from the Rhône. Thereupon the audience much enjoyed an excellent piece of fooling, which we shall dub the Swiss "pirates", by six youthful members of the Eglise Suisse; a polished sketch that revealed painstaking preparation.

Swiss Accordeon Group and the Swiss Male Choir joined forces for the next number, and received well-deserved applause. But what an opportunity was missed at this juncture! All should have been asked to join in; community singing was always a feature of past Fêtes Suisses, and had not the President said in his address: "nous allons chanter", and repeated later on "we are here to sing"?

This memorable programme concluded with a re-appearance of the "Chanson"; again we were spell-bound, we shall only mention that the gay "chez le cordonnier", and the beautiful "le Rhône danse, le Rhône chante" were deservedly encored. The songs were preceded by two folk-dances competently executed.

Yes we are grateful to the organisers for so much patriotic enjoyment. Our thanks are due in great measure to M. Renou and his co-members on the Comité de la Fête, Messrs. Jules Zimmermann and H. Wustiner in particular. And with these thoughts in our hearts we joined in a full-throated NATIONAL ANTHEM that signalled the end.

Well, dear Editor, I am grateful for the assignment, and hope that the result in the reading will provide as much pleasure as it has done in the writing.

J.E.

