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SWISS HUMOUR IN CARICATURE & CABARET

By EDWIN ARNET

During its Shrovetide Carnival Basle scintillates with an esprit balois that makes other brands of humour seem lack lustre in comparison. The Balois has a sharp and witty tongue, inherited no doubt from the "Lälli" King, whose effigy can be seen near the Central Rhine Bridge poking his tongue in permanent derision at Lesser Basle on the other side of the river. Whether the Balois is making the town re-echo to the five bands, whether at the masked balls he is busy quizzing friends and acquaintances with ingenious malice from behind an impenetrable disguise, whether, singly or group-wise, he is lampooning local or international scandals in the masked processions, the Basle Carnival adds up to a popular fête whose spirit attains the higher flights of wit.

Zurich has no Shrovetide Carnival. In recompense it has Gottfried Keller, the writer with the transcendent gift of humour. He is no wag but his enigmatic smile reveals a wise and kindly mind that perceives all the incongruities and absurdities of humanity. Switzerland had two other classical humorists during the Biedermeier period; first the warm and affectionate Zürcher Martin Usteri, who gave the world the song "Freut Euch das Lebens" which has been translated into every language and rivals the blood-thirsty Marseillaise in international renown, and then the Genevan writer and draughtsman Rodolphe Toepffer, whose bizarre tales brought a smile even to the lips of the English and whose flashes of wit earned the praises of Goethe in his old age.

It is a curious quirk of fate that humour has blossomed in Switzerland during her darkest hours: when Switzerland was hemmed in by National Socialism and Fascism, and in this ticklish position had to exercise more prudence and restraint than came naturally to her, there were two classic safety valves through which opinions could be vented: the humorous magazine "Nebelspalter" and the pugnacious cabaret "Cornichon."

The "Nebelspalter" has been appearing for more than 80 years. Its features were stamped by two men the owner-publisher, member of the Council of States E. Löpfe-Benz, and the editor, Carl Böckli. These two have made the "Nebelspalter" a magazine for the man in the street. The Swiss is proud to say that his "Nebelspalter" is as different from the comic magazine intended for the family drawing-room as it is from the virulent publication of the demagogue. It has neither the taproom joviality of the "Meggendorfer" nor the heavy family humour of the "Fliegende Blätter". While Swiss dailies have long eschewed all forms of humour, the "Nebelspalter" has been holding up a distorting mirror in which to show a comical version of Switzerland and the world at large. Whereas Swiss politicians for years regarded political caricature as belittling to their personal dignity and almost looked upon the satirical distortion in their portrait as grounds for a lawsuit, the Swiss people came to know humour through their "Nebelspalter" and to benefit from the acquaintance. There was something Swiss about the humour in the "Nebelspalter" in that it was never cruel, never caustic, never vulgar and never of such a kind as not to allow some possibility of self-improvement to the victim it good-naturedly caricatured. Far from indulging in distasteful cynicism or the *part pour l'art* variety, the Swiss caricaturist takes human foibles, and delights in showing all the little absurdities of the citizen in politics, at work and in everyday life; but a commendable moderation restrains the artist from making the bourgeois into a grimacing brute. Carl Böckli, the draughtsman editor of this paper who has all the lucid mind and wit of the true Appenzeller, not only wields a spirited pencil but is also a real poet who invented *allemand fédéral*, a patois of the Swiss bourgeois who wants to speak a high-flown standard German but makes one howler after another avoids generalization is the most personal characteristic of his art, and thus falls into a mongrel dialect which is unique. Cheap generalization form no part of Böckli's humour. Indeed the way he it is always a specific incident, a specific scandal, a specific blunder of some government or leading figure which he takes as his butt.

Characteristically he shuns the indiscriminate caricature of the soldier, politician or cleric. It is always some particular incident that goads him into action; he never mounts a cheap general offensive.

During the Nazi period when, under the force of circumstances, censorship in Switzerland was most un-Swiss in its strictness, the Helvetians cocked a snook at authority here and there and gave their sense of humour an airing. It was in those days that the "Cornichon" Cabaret, the precursor of the Cabaret "Fédéral," became an artist refuge of liberty. This cabaret was ultimately inspired by Erika Mann's "Pfeffermühle" which imported novelty, freshness and an element of revolution into a field dominated by the conventional cabaret of the sentimental-ironic Viennese school.

Walter Lesch, the feuilleton writer, and Dr. Otto Weissert founded the "Cornichon," which played amidst blissful clouds of Swiss cigar smoke in the terribly cramped, but emotionally stimulating quarters of the "Hirschen" in Zurich. Polished texts also came from the pens of the writer Bax Werner Lenz and later, in the Cabaret "Fédéral," Werner Wollenberger, who has made himself a master of the topical *chansonette*, a somewhat unfamiliar art form in Switzerland.

The poems of the humorous magazines and the chansons of the Swiss cabaret led to a growth of humorous poetry exemplified by Fridolin Tschudi's delightful and cryptic verse devoted to (and yet transcending) topics of the day and Scarpi's astute and humorous commentaries. Recently more and more newspapers have been engaging local commentators, feuilleton writers who pen light and elegant marginalia on current events spiced with a wit not usually found in Swiss daily journalism, thus giving the local news columns a light-hearted nonchalance which is as a rule conspicuously absent from the other sections of the paper.

One aspect of all this cannot be ignored: Swiss humorous drawing is deeply indebted to the Shrovetide Carnival. The masked balls which play such an important part in the town carnival celebrations are a testimony to the taste and the inventive minds of first-rate artists and the ingenious hands of workers in arts and crafts. In Basle the carnival mask has always been grotesque, witty and invariably rooted in the folklore of carnival. In the town, and more especially in Zurich, the artistic, *avant-garde* mask has been more in favour, and has sometimes betrayed the influence of painters such as Alois Carigiet and Hans Fischer, whose early death was much lamented. Lindi, too, is a caricaturist of a quite particular style. It has always been graphic artists like these who have rivalled the folkloristic carnival masks with their sophisticated ball-room masks in which fantasy is strongly tinged with the surrealist.

And just as Gottfried Keller's humour was curbed by melancholy and precisely for that reason became endowed with the nobility of wisdom, so many other things in Switzerland have reached their finest expression only through restraint. In conclusion we may turn to the circus where Grock, according to an English theatre lexicon "the supreme clown of his generation," ennobled the buffoonery of the clown by adding a deeper dimension to the white-faced fool through his bernese simplicity of mind, the pathos of his "sans blague!" and the radiant look in his child-like eyes.



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