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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

Some names remembered

by Gottfried Keller

When I first took up residence in London — a few years before World War Two — a somewhat snobbish member of the then Swiss Colony decided to try and fashion me according to what he considered to be the highest standards of gentlemanly style. He taught me that “one” wears a bowler hat bought from a certain exclusive shop in Jermyn Street. He furthermore told me that “one” had to wear a fresh carnation in “one’s” buttonhole and — and this he considered very important — “one” never opened “one’s” tightly rolled umbrella, but only used it to flag down taxis in case of a sudden downpour. It was also part of his “How to look a gentleman”-doctrine that “one” never wore a brown suit or brown shoes after 6 p.m. “One” had to have embossed (and never merely printed) visiting cards and “one” wore “one’s” handkerchief stuffed into “one’s” left shirt sleeve, and never in a trouser pocket. “One” did, of course, not wear ready made suits, but had a certain tailor in Saville Row and, at any rate, “one” left “one’s” bottom button on “one’s” waistcoat undone. If “one” got invited to lunch, cocktails or dinner over the telephone, “one” did not accept at once, but had to say that “one” would look up “one’s” diary to see whether “one” was free.

The second part of my “adult education” in etiquette and protocol took place when the London Foreign Press Association entrusted me with its presidential office in the midst of World War Two. (There was to be a second, much longer spell two years after the war had ended.) This office involved my being host to — all in all — 72 prominent personalities who made speeches after lunching or dining with us and an invited audience of usually between 350 and 450 politicians, diplomats, journalists and other guests. As we had two Kings (of Greece and Norway), several Princes (among them the Duke of Edinburgh) several Heads of State (among them President Benes of Czechoslovakia) some military leaders (Field-Marshal Montgomery and General de Gaulle) Church dignitaries (The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Temple) as well as innumerable Foreign Ministers (Eden, Bevin, Spaak of Belgium, van Kleffens, Trygve Lie of Norway, Jan Masaryk

and many more) but also a high Communist functionary from Yugoslavia and the first Federal German Chancellor Adenauer at our table, not to mention Ambassadors and High Commissioners by the dozen — I soon learnt who was to be addressed as “Your Majesty”, who as “your Royal Highness”, who as “Your Excellency”, who as “Your Grace” and so on and so forth. As it was considered unseemly to talk politics with any of these guests during the meal, I always researched their biographies thoroughly beforehand in order to find some non-political topics of conversation. Ever so often I noticed that they wore Swiss watches on their wrists, about which “one” could talk for a while. Thus H.M. Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin told me that he had received his from the Swiss Railway Worker’s Trade Union and that the presentation had been made on top of the “Schnige Platte” in the Bernese Oberland. (He pronounced it “Skinig Plat”.) Some of those guests had no small talk

whatever — for example Prime Minister Attlee and Field-Marshal Montgomery — while some others, like the late Sir Stafford Cripps, used to talk to “one” as if “one” were a public meeting which needed converting to Socialism. Ernest Bevin — who was of enormous bulk — once began to sweat heavily at our table, with the result that his white paper collars, bought in the diplomatic store in Moscow got tighter and tighter on him while he spoke. As I went to Switzerland soon after this function I went to my shirt dealers in my native town of Aarau and asked for a dozen proper white stiff collars, size 47. He looked at me in amazement and said: “Mr. Keller, you may have become a little fatter, but size 47 will never fit you!” I then told him that the collars were for the British Foreign Secretary and when I returned to Aarau a year later, I heard that he was still dining out on that fact. Being host to those 72 V.I.P.’s meant a lot of preparatory work and study, but was also in many ways a very fascinating task.

Foreign Office,
S.W.1.

2nd September, 1947.

Dear Mr Keller

I am so sorry that owing to heavy pressure of work and my recent absence from London I have not previously written to thank you for your great kindness in sending me some collars from Switzerland.

It was most thoughtful of you, and I should like you to accept my best thanks.

Yours sincerely,



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15, Carlton House Terrace, S.W.1.

We are indeed indebted to Gottfried Keller for permission to reproduce this letter here. It must surely be one of his valued souvenirs.