

Monday Bulletin, January 15, 1940.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With your consent we shall leave, for this evening, the high spheres of political philosophy. We shall not speak of neutrality, nor of Switzerland's mission among the nations of Europe and the world, neither shall we mention the difficulties encountered today by a certain small country in her determination to maintain national independence and sovereignty. My purpose, rather, is to take you with me on a little visit to one of our smaller cantons, where an event, of a character to prompt reflection on the political organization and social conditions of Switzerland, recently took place.

Last Saturday, in a little village of the canton of Glarus, a deeply moved and thoughtful population accompanied to his last resting place a man whose life career is worthy of our attention. This man, whose premature disappearance from the Swiss political scene is mourned by all, was, as far as his formation and preparation for life's activity is concerned, a typical citizen of Switzerland. After finishing, as all Swiss children do, his elementary school instruction, he spent a few years in high school; and then, being desirous of learning the French language, in addition to his mother tongue, he spent a year in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

Such was this man's intellectual baggage when he became a country postman. Every day, during a period of more than 20 years, he went from house to house and from farm to farm with his load of mail, leaving letters and packages on the corner of kitchen tables, according to a familiar custom. The task could appear monotonous to some; but for Jacob Britt it afforded an opportunity to become acquainted with different classes of society, to discuss with these people about diversified problems of both public and private life; in a word, to know the desires and aspirations of a village - one of these countless little political units which are at the foundation of our constitutional structure.

And ere long, his fellow citizens began to think of him, when something important was to be done, when some weighty responsibility was to be carried. Slowly, but surely, he mounted the rungs of our political ladder. He first



served, at his free hours, as town clerk. He did so well that he soon became a member of the town council, and finally the council's president. But all this time he continued to carry his letters from house to house as the official postman. He devoted his free hours and his evenings to matters of public interest. However, destiny had something still greater in store for him. A place was soon given him with the cantonal authorities; first as a member of the legislative council, and next as a member of the executive council - the cantonal government, *which means a authority similar to that of a state governor.* But, in spite of this additional responsibility, he still continued with the distribution of his letters. The postman's uniform and the magistrate's black frock coat were donned alternatively, according to the public function. And last September, at the outbreak of the European war, like the majority of other Swiss citizens, he put on the military uniform. A cold contracted at the frontier in the service of his country was the cause of his untimely death.

The story of Jacob Britt's life is, indeed, a very simple one; and yet, how typical of our institutions! The Swiss citizen really is of a threefold nature: there is the private worker, the public servant, and the soldier, or defender of his native land. According to the circumstances, the days and the seasons, he is one or the other of these personages, while never fully abandoning the character of all of them. But the most characteristic element of all is the fact that the social conditions of the man exerts, practically speaking, little or no influence on his political or military rôle.

The simple man, who earns a modest living by working with his hands, can be called to the exercise of a most important public function. A public officer, with the administrative responsibility of some 100,000 inhabitants, falls into line at the hour of danger, as a soldier among other soldiers. There are no hard fast social lines with the Swiss people. The social classes are not water tight, and nothing is easier than to pass from one class to another, either up or down. This fact really is the secret of our social unity, and explains, furthermore, the absence, - or at least the infrequency, - of social conflicts in Switzerland.

But above all, - and this is the thought I wanted to come to, - our

country often is administered by simple, unpretentious men. It is not so much required of our public servants that they be men of rare culture and exceptional theoretical training, as it is that they be men of practical experience, men acquainted with the problems of every-day life and with the aspirations and needs of their country's inhabitants. In order to be admitted to the foremost responsibility in public life, a citizen must have been at the school of town and cantonal life. And that is ample proof that our democratic system is not a theory, but a living reality deeply rooted in the every-day life of the land.

*Bell Mills*

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