

Les Suisses sinistrés de guerre

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MOUNTAINEERING IN THE ALPS.

By O. N. BAX.

I arrived at Chamonix on an August afternoon of sunshine and storm. In the early morning of the previous day I had left a small hotel in the Black Forest and had been travelling almost continuously since. The journey as far as Bâle took some twelve hours, as I had to retrace my steps to Strasbourg to retrieve some heavier portions of my luggage. All the hotels in the city seemed to be full (perhaps my somewhat disreputable appearance had something to do with this) and I decided, tired as I was, to save time and money, both of which were shorter than I could have wished, by taking a night train to Geneva. So, having enjoyed a cold bath in the magnificent station (of all the great stations of Europe that of Bâle perhaps offers most to the tired traveller), I strolled down to the banks of the Rhine to a restaurant I know of where one dines on a terrace open to the sky and with the music of the river in one's ears.

Often I recall the magic of that evening. The day had been one of stifling heat; but now the night was drawing in and the cool river air brought relief. One by one the stars came out in a cloudless sky, to be answered in turn by the lights of the city below, which again were reflected in the swirling waters of the Rhine. Every table on the terrace was soon occupied, not by English or Americans, but by native Swiss, unembarrassed by the presence of the foreigner. And for two hours I sat there while group after group in turn sang in perfect time and harmony the beautiful songs of their country.

Regretfully I left this scene, to exchange it for the clatter and discomfort of the railway. Few who have experienced it will forget the horrors of a night journey on the hard wooden seats of a third-class continental railway carriage. Yet I was buoyed up by the hopes of mountaineering to come, and even the grim arrival at Geneva at four-thirty in the morning did little to depress my spirits.

It was not till nearly midday that Chamonix was reached, with my hopes somewhat dashed by the evident uncertainty of the weather. For four years now I had spent a precious fortnight in the Alps and knew disappointment too well. At the station I found awaiting me the friend who was to be my companion during the next fortnight. Hastily we decided to risk bad weather on the morrow, and at once set about our preparations.

First it was necessary to secure a guide. Here it is perhaps worth mentioning that the system at Chamonix differs from that in Switzerland. In the latter country one can choose what guide one wants, and those who are at the head of their profession are often engaged twelve months in advance. But at Chamonix the guides must be engaged in strict rotation — a system of which the disadvantages are obvious. Yet our visit to the *Bureau des Guides* proved fortunate. Within half an hour a charming grey-haired man of about forty-five presented himself at our hotel. His name was Paul Belin, and during the next fortnight he was to prove himself an enterprising guide and a most pleasant companion. For porter we took an engaging and competent young man, Jean Payot by name, who within a few weeks was to depart on his two years' term of military service.

After hurried preparations, complicated by the fact that some essential portions of my luggage had not yet arrived, we just managed to catch the last train to Monteviers, a name which recalls the memory of Leslie Stephen, Mummery, and other famous climbers of the past. Here surely is one of the most magnificently situated hotels in the world. To our left lay the deep valley of Chamonix, now basking in the sun of late afternoon. Almost directly below is the steep ice-fall of the Mer de Glace, and opposite rise the formidable twin peaks of the Dru backed by the towering snows of the Aiguille Verte. To the right of this stretches the Rochefort ridge as far as the Col des Hirondelles, so named by Leslie Stephen, who first made the passage of the pass. Below the final ice-slope he found a flight of swallows lying dead upon the snow, struck down together by some mysterious force of nature as they made their journey to the south. To the right again the view is blocked by the enormous mass of the Grandes Jorasses, and travelling beyond the curve of the glacier by which one makes one's way to the Col du Géant and to Italy, the eye rests at length on the Aiguilles des Charmoz, with the tiny but unclimbable spear-point of the République outlined sharply against the sky.

At length the last train bore away its load of trippers, and after an early dinner we retired for a few hours' sleep. Too soon came the hour of two and the dreaded knock at the door, the chilly dressing by the light of a guttering candle, and the awful breakfast eaten in gloomy silence. How one repents then that one ever aspired to be a mountaineer, and how one envies the happy mortals who still have five or six hours' sleep in a

comfortable bed before them! But once well upon the way, all is changed. Soon the blood is warmed with exercise and expectation and our spirits rise as, like A. D. Godley, we "walk behind a lantern ere the rising of the sun," with a dark, looming mass on our left, and on our right the twinkling lights of Chamonix far below.

There is no sound but the crunch of our own footsteps and the occasional clink of an ice-axe upon rock, or now and then the rush of water as we cross a mountain stream. The path continues almost to the level snout of the notoriously dangerous Nantillons glacier, where curiously enough in three hot days I neither saw nor heard a sign of falling ice. We mount the ice till we reach the middle rocks that provide the easiest way of ascending the ice-fall. These we climb unroped just as day is breaking, and stop for rest and breakfast in the hovel on their summit. The weather is threatening.

The night had been far too warm for our liking and we had watched with disgust the stars being obscured by thin streamers of cloud from the south-west. And sure enough within a few minutes of our arrival the storm broke upon us — heavy rain at first, but later a short but violent burst of thunder. Other people soon arrived, and the hut was overcrowded. A sharp stone provided my seat, and the gaps in the unmortared walls of the hut let in a biting draught, yet I managed to sleep for most of the two hours of our stay. It was not till later that we heard that during this time, and not so very far away, a man had been killed and another fatally injured by lightning as they stood outside the hut on the Grands Mulets.

At length the weather cleared sufficiently for us to start, and for twenty minutes we made our way up the easy snow of the glacier. The *bergschund* (the large crevasse formed where the glacier and mountain meet) below the rocks provided some interest and entertainment; but the rocks themselves, though steep and in places unstable, were not difficult. Two incidents alone stand out in my mind. Once a stone dislodged from far overhead whistled unseen with the sound of a bullet within eighteen inches of my ear. And the last twenty feet below the summit provided interest of a sterner sort. The ascent had to be made up a steep and somewhat exposed crack or chimney — no easy task for the leader. With the protection of the rope from above I mounted ungracefully, but had less success on the return, when I ignominiously "came unstuck" and completed an uncomfortable descent on the rope amid roars of laughter from my companions.

Of view from the summit there was little or none among the clouds, save one glimpse of the mighty tooth of the Grépon close at hand, with the famous Mummery crack, with which we were to rub shoulders later on, full in view.

After a brief and chilly stay the weather drove us down. The summit or ridge of a mountain is no place for dalliance when thunder is about. Giving scrupulous care to the fervent exhortations of the guide to pay *attention aux cailloux* (he could speak nothing but French), we made our way down, in the easier places moving all together, but where the rocks were steeper and the holds less secure, one moving while the other three held fast in case of a slip.

Perhaps a word of warning may not be out of place of the terrible dangers of the rope in the hands of an inexperienced party. If allowed to trail loosely and untended between the members it will catch in loose stones and throw them off upon the heads of those below. And if a slip occurs, it is clearly more difficult to check a man who has already fallen several feet before the strain can be taken. It should be the duty of every member of a party to see that the rope between him and the next man is kept tight and secure. Many fatal accidents have happened through neglect of this precaution.

There followed days of sunshine in the easterly part of the range. We came to regard as our due the hour of basking on a sunlit summit, with the day before us and the world at our feet. We saw the mists of the valleys dissolve as the sun grew warm, gradually revealing the farms and villages that still slept in the gloom of early day. We looked north to the violet shadow that marked the lake of Geneva, and beyond to the dim black line of the Jura faintly outlined against the sky. To the south the warm Italian landscape basked in summer peace, with a vision of the snows of distant ranges that seemed to float in air; and to the east we sought and found peaks of the Oberland and Valais that had been our friends in former days. From the wrinkled, snake-like glaciers at our feet the eye passed over the nearer wilderness on rock and ice to the rounded dome of Mount Blanc dominating all and gleaming in the morning sun. As we mounted some glaciers before daybreak we knew the wonder of the moonlight upon snow and saw again the glory of the morning, as one by one from the east to the west the great peaks were touched with the rays of the sun. And at evening we watched the sun sink in a blaze of glory over the level plains of France,

flushing with a crimson glow snowfield and glacier and rock.

But best of all is the memory of the day spent upon the Grépon, the neighbour of the mountain which we had first climbed; of the panting struggle to ascend vertical cracks and chimneys, all of good sound rock, and some bearing names known to climbers all the world over; of dizzy precipices on either side, from which the imagination shrank in sick apprehension; of the long descents on the doubled rope over unclimbable faces of rock; and of the statue of the Virgin that stands guard upon the highest peak. There we bade farewell to this entrancing region of snow and ice, refreshed in mind and body, and with memories renewed of sun and wind and storm, of toil and thirst, of ease and happiness and the companionship of friends, memories which, whatever else may pass away, endure to the climber for ever.

"Sunday at Home."

Les Suisses sinistrés de guerre.

Le problème de l'indemnisation des Suisses de l'étranger qui ont été victimes de destructions ou de spoliations pendant la guerre est un peu comme le fameux serpent de mer. Les Chambres fédérales sont aujourd'hui appelées à décider si elles entendent biffer définitivement cet objet du programme de leurs délibérations. La commission du Conseil national préposée à l'examen du vœu de M. Duft se réunira le 5 septembre.

Certes, lors du rétablissement de la paix, il fut permis de douter du sort qui était réservé à l'avenir au droit international. Mais les hésitations que l'on pouvait avoir à cette époque ne seraient plus de mise aujourd'hui. Le droit des ressortissants de pays neutres victimes de dommages de guerre est clairement établi à l'étranger. Les principes généraux du droit des gens et les stipulations des conventions de La Haye sont confirmés par les traités d'établissement, les arrêts des cours de cassation belge et française, et les déclarations des maîtres du droit international. Ces juriconsultes — pour ne pas parler de l'intervention de députés français et belges — démontrent d'une manière irréfutable combien juste est la cause des sinistrés suisses de guerre.

M. Robert Fazy, juge fédéral, avant d'être consulté par le département politique, avait confirmé ce droit dans une affaire de réquisition, lorsqu'il exerçait les fonctions d'arbitre unique dans un litige germano-roumain.

L'idée de recourir à un arbitrage international a reçu l'agrément de juriconsultes aussi éminents que MM. Hoffmann, Lonclé, Rollin, de Lapradelle, Thomas Barclay, Nippold, Kebedgy, etc. Par un singulier paradoxe, c'est du côté du Conseil fédéral et de ses experts qu'est venue l'opposition contre la thèse soutenue au nom des sinistrés suisses de guerre par le comité que préside avec autant de distinction que de dévouement M. Grauer-Frey.

Les citoyens qu'intéresse ce sujet liront avec le plus vif intérêt les deux brochures que lui a consacrées l'éminent spécialiste de droit international qu'est M. de Lapradelle, ancien vice-président de l'Institut de droit international. L'auteur envisage deux hypothèses: Ou bien le dommage est fondé sur une violation du droit international, et il doit être réparé par l'Etat qui en est l'auteur; c'est le cas des séquestres, des liquidations, des réquisitions sans indemnité suffisante, ainsi que des dommages causés par des opérations militaires contraies aux conventions de La Haye de 1899 et de 1906. Ou au contraire le dommage n'est pas fondé sur une violation de droit international, et il doit être réparé par l'Etat sur le territoire duquel il s'est produit, alors surtout que celui-ci le répare au regard de ses nationaux et, par convention, s'engage à traiter de la même manière les ressortissants de l'Etat étranger.

En pratique, les dommages de la première catégorie guidaient nos réclamations du côté de l'Allemagne; ceux de la seconde auraient dû être réparés par la France, l'Italie (sans parler de la Belgique, qui se trouve dans une situation tout à fait particulière). Une clause du traité d'arbitrage germano-suisse de 1923 excluait les dommages issus de la dernière guerre de l'arbitrage obligatoire qu'il édictait. A tort ou à raison, on l'interpréta comme une renonciation de la Suisse à faire valoir vis-à-vis du Reich les droits de nos sinistrés de guerre; les commissions parlementaires furent mises au courant de la situation.

Si les pouvoirs publics, pour des raisons de haute politique, ont sacrifié délibérément les droits aujourd'hui indisputés des Suisses sinistrés de guerre, la Confédération est morale-ment tenue de les leur rembourser sous forme d'une subvention. Ou bien la devise nationale "Un pour tous, tous pour un" ne s'appliquerait-elle pas aux citoyens du "vingt-troisième canton"?

R. BOVET-GRISLE.