

Escalade 1602

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ESCALADE 1602

By MARION KEMP

Every year around the middle of December, Geneva celebrates what is known as the "Escalade". This commemorates the time when on the 11th December, 1602, the small citizen army of the then independent state of Geneva successfully repulsed a surprise attack by the Duke of Savoy's 18,000 men to capture the city. The Duke's plan was for a storming party to scale the walls under cover of darkness and, once inside, to open the iron gates for the rest of the force to enter. Some of them managed to reach the ramparts before being detected by the guard, and in the skirmish that followed, a drummer escaped and sounded the alarm. A certain worthy lady by the name of "La Mère Royaume", whose house was situated near the city wall, had, that very night, decided to stay up and wait for her husband to come home. Hearing the commotion in the street below, she flung open the window and saw the Savoyard soldiers. Her immediate reaction was to seize the first weapon that came to hand, which happened to be a huge cauldron of vegetable soup which was simmering over the fire, empty the contents onto the heads of the men below and then heave over the heavy cooking pot as well. By this time, the citizens aroused by the drummer had loaded a cannon, and by firing along the length of the wall managed to destroy the ladders used by the scaling party. In the ensuing battle the Savoyards were soundly beaten and the Genevian death roll numbered a mere eighteen. The following day, all the people gathered in the cathedral to give thanks to God for their miraculous escape and to pay tribute to the eighteen men who had lost their lives.

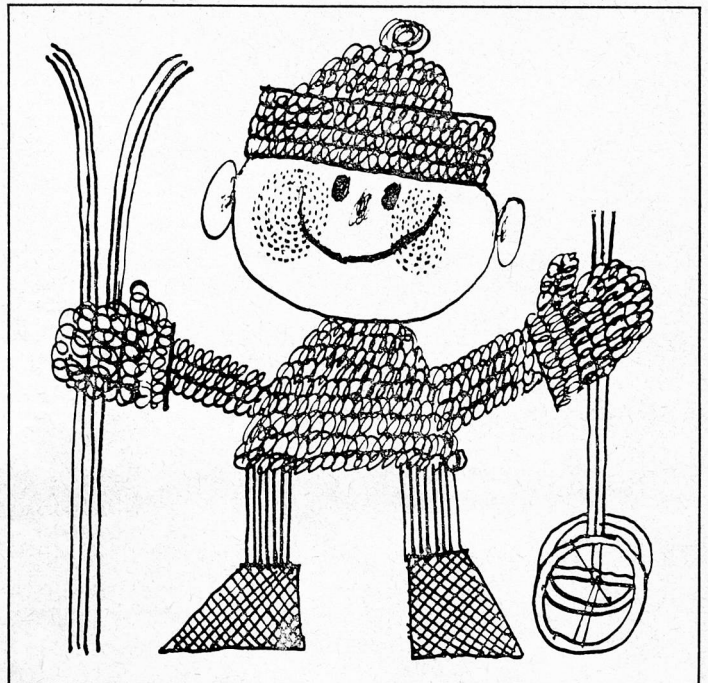
Nowadays, preparations for the celebration of the "Escalade" start at the beginning of December with the appearance in the shops of chocolate cauldrons of widely varying sizes. Each one bears the Geneva coat of arms — a black eagle on a yellow background and a yellow key on red — and is full of vegetables made of marzipan. The Art and History Museum exhibits its special collection of weapons and suits of armour, but the main object of attraction is, of course, the famous cauldron itself. There are also interesting old manuscripts and pictures recording the event and describing some of the anecdotes. One tells of the old lady who, in an extreme state of fright, somehow managed to barricade herself in by moving, unaided a huge wardrobe, which it afterwards took four men to shift back to its original position. It is also said that the head of the church, Theodore de Bèze, who succeeded to that position at the death of Calvin in 1564, was hard of hearing and slept through all the fighting and only heard of the attempted invasion when he woke in the morning and learnt that it had failed!

In the evening of the 11th December there is a service of thanksgiving in the cathedral and in the afternoon, or that of the preceding or following Sunday, a procession full of pageantry and colour parades through the town. First comes the drummer and the trumpeters, followed by the herald, and then the guardsmen with their long pikes and the harquebusiers, a cartload of captured Savoyard arms, and lastly the noblemen and local dignitaries in their 17th century costumes. As dusk falls, torches are lit and the procession winds its way through the narrow, cobbled streets of the old town until it reaches the large square in front of the cathedral, which is in complete darkness. The trumpets sound and as their last notes die away, the herald unrolls his scroll and solemnly reads out the original

proclamation and the names of the eighteen men fallen in battle. A huge bonfire has been prepared in the centre of the square and as this is lit and the flames suddenly leap up, so can be heard the first strains of the 124th psalm "If the Lord Himself had not been on our side". The moment is one of solemnity and of a simple beauty as this act of thanksgiving is once again performed. The ceremony over, the procession prepares to leave, the flickering light from the torches and the bonfire casting weird and fascinating shadows, glinting here and there on polished breastplates and helmets. As the ringing of horses' hooves on the cobbles and the occasional clank of armour fades into the distance, the only sound is the crackling and spitting of the dying bonfire. — Then a ripple of movement suddenly passes through the crowd that has been witnessing this ceremony. They awake, as it were, from a dream, slowly becoming conscious of their numbed feet and hands, of the icy wind on their faces and of the hungry feeling in their stomachs. Their needs at the moment do not differ very much from those of their countrymen in the 17th century, namely a blazing fire and, who knows, perhaps a bowl of steaming vegetable soup.

A revised edition of "Switzerland — the Traveller's Illustrated Guide", has been published (Verbandsdruckerei AG, Bern and Faber Ltd., London). Designed for English-speaking tourists, it contains 192 scenic pictures, 16 fold-out panoramic views, many area maps, full-colour city maps, practical tips for motorists, hikers and passengers on the Swiss trains and extensive information on the country's places of interest. [S.N.T.O.]

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