

BELOW THE SNOW LINE.

BY T. CAMPBELL.

"*Bénissez chaque jour le Seigneur,*" ran the words above our chalet door. Three days had passed since our arrival at Gryon in the Vaudese Alps, and the evening of the third day passed out in rain. We retired early, with hope somewhat deferred, yet springing eternal, perhaps not so devout as our portal legend might suggest: I knowing that, as for two nights past, an outsize and elusive cricket would chirp in all parts of my room, and that, with the dawn, the drowse-dispelling tinkle of a goat's bell under my window would not do much to mitigate the breakfast-table strain. Came the dawn, however, and with it the mists had lifted, giving promise of a good day. The higher peaks were already bathed in the rosy splendour of early morning, and by 7 A.M. we were on our way. Pierre, a young student from the University of Geneva, had the love of mountains in his soul, and he told me with confident pleasure that, ere the summer had gone, he would have done *tous les quatre mille*. Our objective on this occasion was not quite 4,000 metres, but was not far short of it—La Dent de Morcles, rearing its rugged head away in the distance beyond the Muveran. On our left the Massif des Diablerets was clear-cut against the sunrise, while on the distant right rose the five delicate peaks of the Dents du Midi.

Our path led us through meadows and pinewoods, and the morning air was keen. The eternal tinkling of cattle and goat-bells was everywhere—a most pleasant sound when carried from afar on the evening air, but not quite so soothing close under one's window in the early hours. A peculiar feature anent these cows: I was told that all in the canton de Vaud were dun and white, in Freiburg, black and white, corresponding to the cantonal flag and the shutters of the principal chalets. Whether this be true

I know not, but I never discovered how the greens and blues of other cantons affected the bovine pigmentation! We were delayed for some minutes by an unfriendly he-goat which stood in our path and attacked us when we made a detour. This delay was made up for by running, only to be followed by our friend, but he tired first; for the moment, however, we felt sorry, in retrospect, for Mary and her little follower, but considering the size and odour of ours, we deemed ourselves the more unfortunate.

Leaving the last of the scattered pines, we steadily climbed through the grass zone, where grew in profusion campanulas and deep-blue gentians and others whose names I knew not. Far ahead we sighted a party, and within an hour we had overtaken them—half a dozen men and women, with whom we exchanged the greetings of the day. On learning that we intended to pick the coveted edelweiss, they begged us to leave some for them: *Il y en a pour tout le monde*. Their accent betrayed their Germanic origin. We left them labouring on, admiring the fortitude of two of the women, who obviously had not successfully benefited at any time from a slimming course, and who, for the next few hours, would have to bear the burden and heat of the day.

Midday, with a temperature of 50° C., found us on a level boulder-strewn tract, where we threw down our sacks to rest. The shadow of a great rock in a weary land gave us a welcome respite from the glare. A peak near at hand tempted us from our lethargy and we bethought us to climb it before lunch. Concealing our sacks under some loose boulders, we set off. The climb was steep and monotonous until a few stones began to hurtle past us, and, cursing the clumsiness of some one higher up, we lay flat until the avalanche ceased. On looking up we descried against the skyline the heads of two chamois, which seemed to resent our approach. Knowing the danger we had just escaped and the wisdom of these creatures, we hastily retreated to fortify ourselves against the long climb of the afternoon. The place where we had left our rucksacks was well marked, and on nearing we were amazed to see half a dozen enormous grey rats crawling about the rocks. Without more ado we

sent them into hiding with a few well-directed stones. The contents of our sacks were untouched. What puzzled us most of all was how these creatures, to all appearances bloated and well fed, contrived to exist in a wilderness of rock. By this time the party we had passed had arrived and were preparing a meal which, to us, looked sumptuous. We were contenting ourselves with *pâté de foie gras*, dry bread, and wine, while they were serving round plates of delicious soup. Experiencing all the thwarted delight of the "Bisto Kids," we joined them for conversation. They told us that they were Dutch, and we disclosed our respective nationalities. The word *Ecossais* worked a miracle. "*Ecossais!* Then come and have a plate of soup with us." It appeared that two of them had spent the previous summer in Oban and knew Glencoe, Bidean, and Buachaille Etive! After half an hour of home-sick talk we parted with a long farewell, *à l'année prochaine*.

Not a breath of wind, a deep blue sky, and a torrid sun. The ascent was now fairly steep and the path zigzag, quite uninteresting. At last we came to a slope of scree, very steep, which gave us pause. The slope went down 1,000 feet and after that— With infinite care, Pierre leading, we crossed the odd thirty yards, and once across on the safe rock I threw myself down utterly relaxed. A second later a strange hissing sound startled my right ear, and, with a shout of "*Gare à toi!*" Pierre lashed with his stick at two ugly snakes which were darting thin forked tongues at my unsuspecting head. These happenings of the last ten minutes were ample excuse for broaching the flask of Haig's which I had packed away three days before. From now on to the cabane the track continued in the same zigzag monotony. By eight o'clock we were there, to be greeted by a lone Swiss soldier, who set things in order for us for the night. The fee would be one franc per head per night, payable on leaving. Half an hour later we were joined by a bearded Vaudese peasant and his two sons who had climbed from a different angle. Their accent had that charming purity and ease reminiscent of Provence. Pierre had by this time proved his ability in the making of

a huge *omelette aux champignons*, which latter we had gathered on the way. This we seasoned with a cup of hot wine. When darkness fell we went outside to view the Rhone valley: twinkling lights everywhere, as if the starry sky were mirrored far below. On Mont Blanc, "whose dwelling is the light of setting suns," it was not yet night. And so to bed. For a time I lay awake because of the rustlings of rats and mice in the hay quite near us, but the next moment of consciousness I had was the old peasant wakening us to a breakfast of honeyed rolls and *café au lait*.

A steep ascent of one hour found us at the summit, with the sun already above the horizon. The view was really impressive, and would beggar any description. No vegetation, no bird life, no breath of wind—only one lone bee hovering and humming over a stone. The descent was easy—a jog-trot to the cabane. Here the solitary watcher was awaiting us, and to show him our honesty we doubled the fee and let him sample Haig's for the first time! He was very friendly. We were to descend to the village of Dailly, which we could see, as we thought, quite near the plain. In due course we struck a good road, which we followed, and which led to the entrance of the Fort de Dailly, heavily guarded with barbed wire. An imposing notice warned us against entering, but we felt sure that that way lay the village. Innocently we carried on through what seemed to be a deserted camp, until we were stopped by two frankly astonished bakers who had just finished their day's work. Suffice to say that we were told in no mild way to scam, and that right speedily, with terse threats of courts martial and firing squads. Our first taste of Continental militarism. We succeeded, however, in being directed to Dailly village, which we reached at high noon. Here an excellent lunch awaited us and our Buick in which we were to finish the descent and our journey back to Gryon.

We left at three, with the western sky a deep slate colour and the east as fair as the morning. On first gear we zigzagged ninety-eight times before reaching the first-class road running along the side of the Rhone. The first big rain-drops were falling and thunder was growling not far away.

Soon the storm was overhead and the lightning flashing with alarming nearness and frequency. I have always felt an inward disquiet during bad storms, but the nonchalance of the Swiss consoled me utterly. But when rounding a bend a dark red flash swept directly across our path a few yards away. Every one ducked instinctively, and the driver, a veteran of frontier service in peace and war, jammed the car to a standstill. With this flash there was no thunder. Somewhat shaken we drove on.

Home at last in drenching rain. A hot bath, then supper. The storm was renewing itself. With every flash the electric lights of the chalet dimmed. After supper we adjourned for a game of cards, during which the lights went out altogether. Turned off at the village main, we were told. The old-world gleam of candles saw us to bed once more *pour bénir le Seigneur*.



DERRY TREES.