

Escalade

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ESCALADE.

When, some two years ago, I paid a visit to the Reformation monument at Geneva, — the monument which shows in a huge bas-relief the statues of Calvin, the French reformers Farel and Beza, and John Knox, — I noticed on one of the stones the following inscription:—

“On the 12th December, 1602, the people of Geneva repelled the assault of the Duke of Savoy, and so assured their political and religious independence.”

This inscription takes us back to a memorable winter night which the people of Geneva never forget, and which they have celebrated each December for the last 349 years.

On that night, the citizens were aroused by armed men climbing up ladders to scale their walls, while others waited outside to enter through the gate which they hoped to see blown up — but in an hour and a half all the invaders were captured or driven out.

The force was recruited by Charles Emanuel, the Duke of Savoy, and consisted of 1,000 foot, 100 mounted arquebusiers, 200 yeomanry and two companies of cuirassiers. Crossing the city moat on rafts, this force raised its ladders against the ramparts between the Rhone and the Boulevard de l'Oie, and more than 300 men climbed into the city. Their object was to get round to the New Gate opening on Plainpalais, blow it up, and so give entrance to the large body of troops concentrated outside the city.

The alarm was given by the wife of a man called Royaume, mother of seven boys and seven girls by bringing out a “marmite” — a pot of boiling vegetable soup — and she threw the contents over the invaders, scalding some with it, and knocking others on the head with her empty pot. Their cries, woke up the citizens of Geneva, and a cannon was dressed against the ladders which were leaning against the ramparts where the invaders had entered at the Boulevard de l'Oie. The citizen force grew stronger from moment to moment, and the Savoyards who had climbed in had no way of escape open to them. Thirteen of them were captured and were hanged the next day. Seventeen of the citizens lost their lives. These were buried together in the Church of St. Gervais, where their tombs are honoured still.

Very soon re-inforcements from Berne and Zurich came to the support of Geneva, and their combined forces took the offensive and advanced into Savoy; after this, on February 12th, 1603, the Savoyards sued for peace, and their Duke renewed the guarantees for the integrity of Geneva.

This in short, is the historical back-ground of the Escalade, which, as mentioned before, is celebrated annually by the citizens of Geneva.

* * *

This event, I understand, has also been celebrated by our compatriots of Geneva in London for the last 33 years, and this year, for the first time, I was invited, together with my wife, to take part in this festival.

Some time ago, I wrote in this paper, that social functions in the colony follow much the same pattern and that “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose,” well I was wrong, this celebration had a *cachet* all of its own, and differed vastly from any other function that I had attended in the colony for the last twenty-three years as Editor of the “Swiss Observer.”

When I received the invitation I had some serious misgivings as to whether to accept or not. I considered that this unique anniversary celebration was primarily and purely a family affair of our Geneva brethren, and any outsider would more or less be treated as a “gate crasher”, and might run the risk of having the “marmite” of Mère Royaume hurled on his head.

It was pointed out to me, however, that the Bernese at the time promptly came to the aid of the citizens of Geneva, and I took the kind invitation as a compliment to my native canton and, therefore, accepted to be present on Wednesday, December, 12th, at the Majorca Spanish Restaurant, 66, Brewer Street, W.1.

About forty of our Geneva compatriots assembled there under the chairmanship of Mr. R. de Cintra. Unfortunately a hitch occurred in the arrangements, and the “marmite” which was due to arrive at Northolt from Geneva, and was to be collected by the President at the airport, went to Blackpool instead, as due to a dense fog over London all planes were diverted to this aerodrome. Thus the company was deprived of “breaking” the “marmite, an event I was looking forward to with pleasant anticipation, but by sheer good fortune a replica in nougat, filled with marzipan vegetables, was forthcoming through the courtesy of one of the members, but obviously it could not be brought to boiling point.

The gathering then settled down to a very sumptuous dinner consisting of Hors d'Oeuvres Plainpalais, Poisson de Prés de la Belotte, Poulet de la Rôtisserie, Coussin Rissoto, Marmite Mère Royaume (still at Blackpool) Coupe de la Tertasse, Café St. Gervais.

I was very busy struggling with a chicken bone, when suddenly a tremendous explosion occurred almost right under my nose, followed by others in various parts of the room and for one moment I felt myself transferred back to the nights of the London “Blitz”. Hardly had one recovered from the shock, when innumerable minor explosions took place caused by fire-works of the squib variety. The noise accompanied by shrieks from the Ladies turned the sedate atmosphere which had reigned a few minutes earlier into pandemonium.

When silence was restored and nerves quietened down, the symbolic “breaking” of the “marmite” took place, and the names of the 17 victims of the Escalade were called out, whilst the company stood in silence. It was a solemn and most impressive moment.



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Another characteristic feature of this celebration is the "roll-call" in which everyone present has, one by one, to announce his or her name, date of birth and birthplace.

This must be, especially for the Ladies, a trying ordeal, as some of them are loathe to make their age public property but on that Wednesday they bravely and without the slightest hesitation divulged the number of years they have graced this universe, but was it the correct age? I wonder!

When I, not without trepidation, announced my birthplace as Berne, the whole company sang the "Bärnarmarsch", which was a lovely gesture, and nearly brought a lump into my throat, and when my life's partner gave London as her place of birth, "It's a long way to Tipperary" was sung; what a jolly and lively crowd our brethren from Geneva are!

Under the direction of Mr. Duprat, who acted very efficiently and amusingly as compère, many songs were rendered such as "La Belle Escalade", "La Genevoise" and "Ce qu'è lai'nau," there was even dancing, if one might have called it thus, it looked to me more like a red Indian war dance; recitations were given, which to make them more impressive, were accompanied with more fireworks.

This was indeed an evening of both solemnity and great mirth, which I would not have missed for anything, but if all functions in the Colony would be held with fireworks, explosions and with such an intensity of feeling. I am afraid I would not be here anymore, but if Providence would grant me a wish, I should like to come next year again to the Escalade.

ST.

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