

MEMORIAL OF THE ENGLISH ALPINE CLUB TO THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT, WITH REFERENCE TO THE GUIDE SYSTEM OF CHAMONIX.

The following memorial has been lately presented to the French Government on behalf of the Alpine Club. For the document in its present form the President and Committee are alone responsible; but they wish to take this opportunity of recording the great service rendered in its preparation by Mr. Alfred Wills, who not only offered the assistance of his intimate knowledge of Chamonix, but found time to put into shape and draft the memorial itself.

In former years the guides of Chamonix stood at the head of their class; but latterly complaints of the difficulty of procuring at that place competent and trustworthy men have been so frequent as to have forced themselves upon the notice of all persons interested in Alpine travel. The members of the English Alpine Club naturally possess great facilities for obtaining information on this subject, and their attention has been drawn to it for some time past. Your memorialists believe that there has been for many years a gradual and progressive deterioration in the body of Chamonix guides. The glaciers of Mont Blanc are better known than those of probably any other Alpine region, and they offer no special difficulties or dangers; yet during the last few years they have been the scene of five fatal accidents, involving the loss of nineteen lives, and the most lamentable and fatal catastrophe of all occurred upon an expedition in which eight guides and porters were engaged.

Even where no actual danger is incurred, the amount of inconvenience, annoyance, and disappointment resulting from the present system is very serious, and exceedingly injurious to the reputation of Chamonix. In consequence, the stream of Alpine enterprise is setting steadily eastwards, and the spot of all others endeared to the lovers of the Alps by natural attractions and by traditional associations, is being gradually abandoned. Experienced mountaineers prefer, for any novel or difficult expedition, to rely upon the aid of foreign guides, possessing the skill and courage which they find it difficult to meet with at Chamonix; whilst many less adventurous travellers quit the district, full of annoyance and disgust at the incompetence and extortion of which they have been made the victims. Members of the Alpine Club, being allowed by the existing rules the free selection of their guides, have less personal interest in the matter under discussion than the rest of the travelling public, but they feel that it would be wrong on that account to abstain from bringing under the notice of the French Government a condition of affairs which they believe to be prejudicial alike to the safety and comfort of travellers in general and to the true interests of the inhabitants of this most interesting district.

Your memorialists believe that many of the evils complained of are due, first, to certain defects in the rules comprised in the '*Règlement et Tarif de la Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix*' (a copy of which

accompanies this Memorial), and, secondly, to the manner in which these rules are carried out.

The principal points to which your memorialists desire to call your attention are the following:—1. The system of admission to the Company. 2. The election and functions of the chief guide. 3. The power of selection of his guide left to the traveller. 4. The publication of a list of guides, with their qualifications. 5. The tariff. The present Memorial will consider each of these subjects in turn.

1. *As to the system of admission into the Company of Guides.* ('*Règlement*,' Arts. 1-8.)

The rules provide for an annual examination of candidates by a commission consisting of (1) the juge de paix, (2) the mayor of Chamonix, (3) the chief guide, (4) the president of the Council of Administration of the Company, (5) a guide named each year by the Council, (6) the communal instructor. The candidate must obtain the suffrages of four out of the six members of the Council. He is required to show a knowledge of the elements of primary instruction, of the different localities in the valley of Chamonix and the neighbouring district, and of the objects of interest to travellers; to prove that he has made, as a volunteer, and in company with, at least, two guides, 'all the ordinary and extraordinary excursions;' that he has satisfied the law touching the recruitment of the army; and that he exercises a calling. He must be 'of notorious good conduct,' as witnessed by the written certificates of the juge de paix and the mayor; and his physical capacity is to be established by the certificate of a medical man to be named by the council of the corporation.

Your memorialists desire to point out that the position in life of the persons whose duty it is to ascertain whether or not candidates possess the prescribed qualifications renders their conscientious discharge of this duty almost impracticable. Four out of the six members of the examining commission are certain to be natives of the valley of Chamonix, brought up amongst the very persons with respect to whom it is their duty to perform the invidious task of refusing the diploma of guide in cases of incompetency. Three of them are essentially of the same class as that to which the candidates themselves belong. The difficulty of their position is heightened, and at the same time a door of escape from the conscientious discharge of a disagreeable duty is opened by the fact that, in the most critical respect of all, the law requires an impossibility. The candidate must have made 'all the excursions, ordinary and extraordinary,' lists of which are given in the '*Règlement*.' The first numbers upwards of forty separate and distinct expeditions, several of which, such as the ascents of the Aiguille de la Floria and the Aiguille de la Glière, and the passage of the Col du Dérochoir, so far from being 'ordinary,' in the common acceptance of the term, are almost unknown to excursionists, and probably have not been made by one-twentieth portion of the Company of Guides. The 'extraordinary' excursions are upwards of thirty in number, and comprise, besides the ascent of Mont Blanc, the ascents of the Aiguille Verte, of the Aiguille d'Argentière, of the Aiguille du Midi, of the Aiguille du Tour, of the Aiguille de Bionnassay, and of the Grandes

Jorasses, as well as a great number of other expeditions of great difficulty, and even hazard, many of which have been accomplished only two or three times in all, and some of which are hardly likely to be repeated. To accomplish the whole of the 'ordinary' excursions would be the work of at least two months, steadily devoted to such a purpose. To accomplish all the 'extraordinary' excursions would require the devotion of the entire fine season for several summers in succession. It is perfectly obvious that the law cannot be observed with respect to either class of expedition, and that the tendency of such exaggerated requirements must be to turn into a valueless and illusory form the examination which, in compliance with the 'Règlement,' is supposed to take place as to the candidate's knowledge of the localities and objects of interest of Chamonix and the neighbourhood. With regard to the other qualifications, it is believed that many instances occur in which persons who have been rejected as recruits for the army have been allowed to be entered upon the roll of guides; and that the exercise of a regular industry on the part of the candidate is very frequently more nominal than real. If the 'notorious good character' and the physical capacity required by the law really exist at the time the candidate presents himself for enrolment, it must follow that there is something demoralising in the profession of a guide; for the Committee of the Club have received from many most trustworthy sources complaints of intemperance and of want of physical power on the part of guides.

Your memorialists have no reason to think that the requirement of the law as to the possession by the candidate of the elements of primary instruction is not complied with; nor do they for a moment suppose that the juge de paix and the mayor have given wilfully untrue certificates of character. But these officials are the last persons to whose ear the fame of excesses incompatible with the spirit of the Article in question would come. They would be concealed as much as possible by the individual, and the strong *esprit de corps* which binds together the members of a small mountain community would make them equally reticent on such a subject to the authorities; whilst, with reference to the qualifications of the candidates in matters of mountain craft, the juge de paix, the mayor, and the schoolmaster would, of course, trust entirely to the special knowledge of the other members of the commission. It is submitted that the facts here pointed out all lead to the conclusion previously expressed, that the independence necessary to the discharge of the duties of the commission cannot be expected from persons of the same locality and class as the candidates themselves; and it is found, in fact, that the only persons who do discharge their duty as to the matters which fall within their special cognisance are those who are strangers to the neighbourhood, or raised above the ordinary local influences.

The provisions to which attention has above been called have a demoralising effect in another and not unimportant respect. All the aspirants who present themselves for examination must present certificates from guides that they have performed the necessary excursions. It is believed that these are usually in a general form; but whether general or not, they cannot be true, for no man could procure one if it

had to be true. The inevitable consequence is a wholesale system of manufacture of false certificates, which cannot fail to operate disastrously upon the character of those who are engaged in it.

On the other hand, no provision is made for any attempt to ascertain that the candidate has the least idea of the places where, or the circumstances under which, danger is likely to be experienced, or of what he ought to do in case of difficulty, peril, or accident.

2. *As to the election and functions of the Chief Guide.* (Arts. 10-20.)

The chief guide is elected once in two years by the votes of the guides inscribed on the roll, and he is capable of re-election. His salary is not less than 600 and not more than 900 francs, a sum too low to attract guides of the first order, but high enough to be an important object to those of inferior position. Moreover, it is apparently derived from the payments of those over whom he is supposed to preside. The principal duties, so far as travellers are concerned, of the chief guide are defined by Art. 14. He is charged with the duty of providing guides for travellers, of giving them information on matters appertaining to the places they desire to visit, of organising expeditions, and of seeing that the 'Règlement' is exactly observed.

It is obvious that the comfort and security of travellers must depend very greatly upon the intelligence, knowledge, and character of the chief guide. It is to him that appeal must constantly be made for the decision of a multitude of questions of great importance to excursionists, as to many of which the interests of the traveller and those of the guide are in opposition. It is upon him that must devolve the task of checking attempts at extortion or imposition, and of correcting, where necessary, by his authoritative voice, the information which the traveller may have received from idle and interested persons. That the whole of the guides of Chamonix are untrustworthy, lazy, or extortionate, is not suggested or believed for a moment; but that out of 300 members of the Company there must be a certain number in whom such faults may be expected, there can be no doubt, otherwise Chamonix would present a strange and happy exception to the ordinary experiences of life. There must therefore be constant occasions on which the chief guide must either violate his duty or offend an elector and paymaster. It is natural that the nominee of the guides should be a person who will, as a rule, take the part of the guide against the traveller, and not that of the traveller against the guide. It is believed that such has been in practice the result of the elective system as applied to the appointment of chief guide. Your memorialists venture to suggest that the chief guide should be nominated, as was formerly the case, by the superior authorities; that, if possible, some intelligent and trustworthy man from a distance, and not mixed up with local affairs and local influences, should be selected. They believe that in a very short time he would acquire the local details and the small amount of technical knowledge necessary to the adequate discharge of his duties, and that he would be far more independent and more likely to afford protection and disinterested information to travellers than a person elected under the present system can possibly be. His presence at Chamonix would be necessary only for about five months in the year, and it would

tend greatly to his independence and usefulness if he were employed elsewhere during the rest of his time.

3. *As to the power of selection of his guide left to the traveller. (Art. 21).*

The present rule is that, subject to certain exceptions, in which a choice is reserved to the employer, the guides shall be assigned to travellers by rotation; the recommendation, either by the chief guide or any other person, of a guide being rigorously forbidden (Art. 24).

The Club respectfully suggest that there ought to be entire freedom of choice on the part of the traveller; that, in cases where the traveller expresses no special preference, it should be the duty of the chief guide to recommend the most suitable individuals, whether for ordinary or extraordinary excursions; and that much greater facilities than exist at present should be afforded for ascertaining the experience and antecedents of the guides. There is no objection to maintaining the system of rotation, subject to these large exceptions; but your memorialists would respectfully represent that nowhere in the Alps, except at Chamonix, is any restriction placed upon the free choice of a guide by the traveller; and they can conceive of no principle, except that of communism pure and simple, which can justify the deliberate suppression by law of the natural rewards of superior intelligence, manners, goodwill, vigour, or capacity—qualities the presence or absence of which may be as agreeably or as painfully felt upon the minor excursions of the ordinary tourist as upon the greater expeditions of the true mountaineer.

4. *As to the publication of a list of guides, with their qualifications.*

It is further suggested that a register should be kept at the Bureau, in which the traveller may look over the names of the guides and see what great expeditions they have each made. At present there is no such record available to the public, and, except by a violation of the 'Règlement' on the part of some one, a stranger cannot obtain the needful information, and may be put off with a guide utterly unfit to take the conduct of a difficult expedition. There would be no difficulty in providing a nominal register, in which all the extraordinary expeditions taken by each guide should be recorded under his name; and it would add greatly to its value if the name of the employer were also given, and he were requested, in the case of the expedition terminating elsewhere than at Chamonix, to enter in his guide's pocket-book a certificate that the expedition had been accomplished, and in either case to append any remarks he might think fit to make upon the conduct or capacity of the guide. Good guides would find no difficulty in inducing travellers to take this amount of trouble on their behalf. The guides' books should be officially inspected at the end of each season, and the remarks contained in them added to those already entered upon the register. A list of the guides should be printed every year, with an abstract of the contents of the register, and a copy deposited in each hotel. Such a list would command a ready sale at a moderate price, and, by affording to the traveller an easy means of testing the qualifications of the guides, would subject them to the

wholesome stimulus of competition, and offer to them the legitimate rewards of superiority. Your memorialists consider that the change they are now venturing to urge upon the Government is of greater consequence, and will be productive of far more beneficial results, than any amendment in the system of admission. In fact, without the beneficial operation of natural competition, they believe that the character of the corporation of guides must only sink lower and lower.

5. *As to the Tariff.*

Your memorialists believe that the sum allowed by the tariff for the ascent of Mont Blanc is much too high, both absolutely and relatively to many other items of the tariff, and they believe that this excessive allowance has had a very serious effect in damping the energies and destroying the enterprise of the Chamonix guides. The tariff for Mont Blanc is 100 francs. This amount was fixed very many years ago, when the ascent was much more difficult in itself, and was made under conditions totally different to those of the present day. The expedition is now commonly accomplished in two days, of which the first is a very light one; and if the weather be fine and the snow favourable, the second presents nothing like serious fatigue or exhausting conditions to a healthy man, fairly accustomed to out-of-door pursuits. Under ordinary conditions, the expedition is little more than a promenade, not unfrequently undertaken by ladies. The remuneration in proportion to the fatigue and risk involved is then enormous, and the money is so easily earned that the guides who have a chance of making the ascent several times in a season have no heart for any less profitable undertaking, and enter upon almost any other expedition with regret and dislike. On the other hand, in doubtful weather, or with a tired traveller, the temptation to reach the top, or as near the top as may be, and to earn this large sum, is so great as sometimes to lead to the disregard of every warning which would induce a prudent man to turn back, and it has thus contributed to very lamentable catastrophes. A few instances will illustrate the excessive amount of this charge, as compared with those—by no means too low—for other expeditions in the neighbourhood, or in other parts of the Alps, and will sufficiently account for the reluctance of the guides to turn their steps in any direction but along the 'Chemin du Mont Blanc.' The passage of the Col du Géant, and the return journey to Chamonix, occupies three long days, of which the first is nearly as fatiguing as the second day of the ascent of Mont Blanc; the tariff is 50 francs. The passage of the Col d'Argentière to Orsières presents much more difficulty than the ascent of Mont Blanc, and the guide can scarcely return to Chamonix before the third day; the tariff is 60 francs. The passage of the Col de Miage to Courmayeur involves at least four days' work, and the col is a difficult one; the tariff is 60 francs. The same may be said of the much more serious pass of the Col de Trélatête, which is fixed at the same figure. The ascents of the Aiguille Verte, and of the Grandes Jorasses (the last requiring a preliminary journey to Courmayeur) are far more difficult than that of Mont Blanc; the tariff is 80 francs in each instance. Such illustrations might be multiplied, but enough has been said to illustrate the operation of the tariff. A few examples may

be quoted from other parts of the Alps. The ascent of Monte Rosa is accomplished in one day from the Riffelberg, but it is much more difficult under ordinary circumstances than that of Mont Blanc; the tariff is 40 francs. The Finsteraarhorn, the Aletschhorn, the Mönch, and the Jungfrau are all mountains of the first order; the tariff for their ascent from the Äggischhorn is fixed at 60, 40, 50, and 70 francs respectively. The only ascent in Switzerland for which the regular tariff is as high as 100 francs is that of the Matterhorn, which is incomparably more difficult and dangerous than that of Mont Blanc.

There is much difficulty in fixing the price to be paid for abortive expeditions; and yet, with respect to the extraordinary ascents, your memorialists believe that the temptation offered by the difference between the price to be paid for the accomplished expedition and that payable in case of failure has already been, and will probably again be, instrumental in bringing travellers into great danger. An attempt is made by Arts. 33 and 37 to fix some scale of remuneration in case of certain specified expeditions partially accomplished, but in the great majority of cases there is no rule applicable; the guide who should be compelled by bad weather to return from the Aiguille du Midi, for instance, without having reached the top, would in strictness probably be entitled under the tariff to ten francs only, as for 'an expedition on the glaciers of the chain of Mont Blanc above the line of vegetation.' So extreme a result is not likely to occur with most employers, but the fear of being exposed to the operation of such a law is very likely to give an undue temptation to persevere in spite of the dictates of prudence. A discretion might safely be vested, under such circumstances, in the chief guide, if properly nominated, in cases where the traveller and his guide cannot agree; and such a change would, it is believed, conduce to the general safety.

In brief, your memorialists suggest as follows:—

1. That the present system of admission to the Company of Guides be altered.
2. That the chief guide be an independent person, appointed, during pleasure, by the préfet of the district.
3. That unrestricted choice of guides be allowed to all classes of travellers, and that in those cases in which the traveller shall express no preference, it shall be the duty of the chief guide to recommend the guides most suitable for the expedition proposed.
4. That a list of guides, with their respective qualifications, be printed annually, and sold to the public.
5. That the tariff be modified, and, in particular, that the charge for the ascent of Mont Blanc be reduced.

(Signed) WILLIAM LONGMAN, President of the Alpine Club.

A. W. MOORE, Secretary.

We have received from Mons. Philippe, 'ex-préfet de la Haute Savoie,' a long letter, originally published in an Annecy newspaper, of which he requests the insertion. The portion devoted to justifying, as against Mons. Loppé's criticisms, his official conduct we willingly find

room for ; but it has been necessary, on more accounts than one, to omit the remainder.

‘ En 1872, les guides de Chamonix ont présenté à l’approbation préfectorale un règlement d’administration. Ce règlement était à peu de chose près, le même que celui qui avait été approuvé sous le régime précédent.

‘ Après m’être entouré de tous les renseignements propres à m’éclairer, je biffai certaines dispositions qui me paraissaient mauvaises ou in-exécutables, j’en modifiai d’autres, j’en ajoutai même quelques-unes destinées à sauvegarder le plus possible les droits des voyageurs aussi bien que ceux des guides.

‘ Or, il résulta de tout ce remaniement, que les choses restèrent comme elles étaient auparavant, sauf quelques modifications de détail, dont la plus importante était l’élection du guide-chef par la Compagnie. Puis, et c’est ici qu’est le fameux grief, le prix des grandes courses, des courses périlleuses, était légèrement augmenté. Ainsi l’ascension du Mont-Blanc qui se payait au guide 80 fr. fut portée à 100 francs !!

‘ Voilà le grand crime !

‘ Et c’est si bien à cela que se sont bornées les fameuses augmentations qu’on nous reproche, que l’*Alpine Journal* avoue lui-même que le tarif des courses est assez modéré, *excepté pour ce qui concerne l’ascension du Mont Blanc.*

‘ Quel crime j’ai donc commis ! J’ai autorisé une augmentation de 20 francs pour une course aussi dangereuse que celle qui a pour but la sommité de la montagne la plus haute de l’Europe !’

Mons. Philippe goes on to support at length the increase of the tariff on the ground, that climbers are not, in cases of fatal accident, in the habit of assisting the families of the guides who have perished.

‘ L’autre grief articulé, c’est que le guide-chef n’est plus nommé par le préfet, mais par la Compagnie des guides.

‘ A cet égard, il y a matière à discussion ; la Compagnie des guides est une société particulière, tout en étant soumise à un règlement d’administration publique ; il semble naturel qu’elle élise son chef, dont les devoirs, du reste, sont écrits tout au long dans le règlement.

‘ Reconnaît-on que cette manière de faire soit défectueuse ? Qu’on la change ; l’expérience est un grand maître, et il faut savoir se soumettre à ses décisions.’

Mons. Philippe next explains the origin of the 62nd article, that pretending to inflict legal penalties on the critics of the ‘ Compagnie.’

‘ Lorsque l’article en question m’est tombé sous les yeux, j’en ai demandé la signification, l’utilité ; je ne comprenais pas.

‘ Veut-on savoir ce qui m’a été répondu ?

‘ — C’est un article spécialement destiné à une seule personne qui, contrariée de ne pouvoir tout mener à sa guise à Chamonix, fait une croisade continuelle contre nous ; va, vient, dit, parle et fait tant qu’il en résulte un ralentissement dans la discipline des guides, et que les contraventions au règlement se multiplient.

‘ — Mais, fis-je observer, pourquoi insérer un article pour les faits et gestes d’une seule personne ? C’est affaire au guide-chef que de rappeler chacun au respect du règlement.

‘— Nous ne pouvons pas nous passer de cet article, me fut-il répondu; si vous ne l'approuvez pas, la majeure partie des guides sérieux se retire de la Compagnie.

‘Que faire? On me cita des faits, et j'approuvai!’

The manner in which the revision was made is curiously illustrated by this frank confession. The 62nd article was, we are told, retained against the better sense of the préfet, in consequence of threats on the part of some of the guides—threats which no one acquainted with Chamonix could have imagined serious.

We wish Mons. Philippe had gone on to explain how he purposed to give effect to this ‘Article,’ and what is the exact nature of the ‘pains and penalties’ reserved for free discussion under the French Republic, which had he remained in office he would have been prepared, if sufficiently threatened, to inflict upon the critics of Chamonix.

But this rule, though a fair subject for a passing laugh, is quite beneath serious criticism. If it pleases Chamonix it does not hurt us. Should another préfet be found ready to sanction it we shall not protest against its retention.

The judiciousness of the more important modifications made in 1872 in the Chamonix règlement must be decided, as Mons. Philippe reasonably says, by their results. Judged by this test they have been generally condemned.

ALPINE NOTES.

FOREIGN ALPINE CLUBS.*—The founders of our Alpine Club, like those of most great institutions, had little idea of the impulse they were about to give throughout the whole of civilised Europe to mountain exploration, or of the wide-spread organisations which would arise out of the social meetings of a few English oromaniacs—if the word may be coined.

For the first five years the seed sown did not multiply. It was not until 1862 that the second Alpine Club, the Austrian, was founded at Vienna. In the following year the Swiss Club, now numbering nearly 1,500 members, and the Italian, now numbering over 1,200 members, had their origin. The German Club, lately united with the Austrian, was not established until 1869. Of all these bodies brief notices have appeared from time to time in these pages. But the English Club has other children of whose existence we believe many of its members are unaware. The ‘Verein der Gebirgsfreunde in Steyermark,’ has its centre at Gratz, counts 500 members, publishes an annual volume, and spends part of its income in improving mountain paths and building huts. The ‘Club Alpino del Trentino’ is a body founded only in 1873, but which has begun well, some of its members having already climbed the Presanella and the Brenta Alta. At Pinzolo and Primiero

* Many of the facts mentioned in this notice are derived from a short article on ‘Les Sociétés Alpines,’ in the last ‘Bollettino’ of the Italian club.