

WILLIAM BENSON EARLE'S VISIT TO CHAMONIX IN 1767

BY G. R. DE BEER

AFTER the first description* in English of a visit to Chamonix by Richard Pococke and William Windham in 1741, there is a gap of thirty-two years until 1773 when John Moore and his party went to Chamonix and gave a description † of the expedition which up till now has ranked as the second in English. That British visitors to Chamonix were not lacking during this time is certain. Writing in 1762, the duc de la Rochefoucauld ‡ said that ever since 1741 all the English who came to Geneva had made the journey to Chamonix. In the case of one expedition, the names of the party are known: Captain Forbes, Mr. Mackinnon (an American-born son of a Scots family), and Mr. St. John Jefferyes accompanied the brothers Jean-André and Guillaume-Antoine De Luc from Geneva to Chamonix in 1754, but no account written in English of this visit is known.§

I have had the good fortune to find the account which William Benson Earle wrote of his expedition of 1767 and which he subsequently printed anonymously in the *Monthly Miscellany*, Vol. III, for March, 1775. This publication was not only ephemeral, for it did not survive its third volume, but it is now extremely rare. The copy in the British Museum was destroyed by enemy action during the last war; neither the Bodleian nor the Cambridge University Libraries appear to possess it, and it is by the kindness of Trinity College, Dublin, and the National Library of Ireland that a photostat has been obtained of the copy which is preserved there (T.C.D. vol. Gall. AA. 7.9.). I hope therefore that readers of the *Alpine Journal* will be glad to see a transcription of this little-known document printed in its pages. The copy of the *Monthly Miscellany* is itself incomplete, for the article

* *An Account of the Glacieres or Ice Alps in Savoy, in two letters one from an English Gentleman to his friend at Geneva. . . .* London 1744. Besides Richard Pococke and William Windham of Fellbrigg, this party consisted of Thomas Hamilton 7th Earl of Haddington, the Hon. George Hamilton Baillie, Walter Chetwynd, Richard Neville Aldworth (afterwards Neville), Robert Price, and Benjamin Stillingfleet.

† *A view of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland, and Germany.* London 1779. Besides Dr. John Moore of Dovehill, the party consisted of his son Jack (afterwards General Sir John Moore), Douglas Hamilton 8th Duke of Hamilton, Clotworthy Upton (afterwards 1st Lord Templetown), George Nugent Temple Grenville, and Mr. Kennedy.

‡ 'Relation inédite d'un voyage aux Glacières de Savoie fait en 1762 par un voyageur français,' publié par L. Raulet, *Annuaire du club alpin français*, t. 20, 1894.

§ An account of this expedition which involves the earliest known American to travel in the Alps, is being prepared for the *American Alpine Journal*.

in question is accompanied by the statement ' *With a Beautiful ENGRAVING* ' which is missing.

The author of the description of the journey of 1767, William Benson Earle, is no obscure person.|| He was born at Shaftesbury in 1740, educated at Salisbury Cathedral School, Winchester College, and Merton College, Oxford, and was described as a philanthropist because he bequeathed large sums of money to charitable and learned institutions. He died at Salisbury in 1796.

It is possible that Earle had visited Switzerland before, because a Mr. Earle accompanied R. Kaye¶ from Basle to Geneva in 1763, and it may have been the same man although I doubt it.

Something is known of the circumstances under which Earle found himself at Geneva in 1767. In company with Henry Penruddock Wyndham, Earle and his servant Thomas left England on September 4th, 1765, for the grand tour of Europe.** They spent the winter in Rome and the Spring of 1766 in Naples, after which they visited Sicily and ascended Etna in June. After spending the following winter and spring in Florence, Earle and Wyndham left Turin for Geneva on July 8, 1767. Details of the journey are given in the correspondence of Henry Penruddock Wyndham of which, through the kindness of Lord Leconfield, the following extracts are quoted.

Lausanne 21 July 1767.

' . . . You have seen by the papers that the French King has stopped all communication between France and Geneva†† and for that purpose French troops strictly examine everyone who passes to and from Geneva, no one can pass without a passport from the Prime Minister‡‡ at Paris or the French Resident§§ at Geneva. It happens that the dominions of France surround the Republic on every side except that of Savoy, and so closely that the troops are within three miles of the town. Nay more, on this side of Geneva there is a little slip of France||| which extends quite to the Lake and about a mile or two belonging to the Republic and again another strip of France. Hence inhabitants cannot go more than one mile from home . . . '

Wyndham also said in the same letter : ' I parted from my friends yesterday at Geneva, who are making an excursion to the Mountains of Savoy.' This proves that the friend to whom Earle refers in his

|| William Benson Earle is included in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 16, p. 323.

¶ *Extracts from the Literary and Scientific Correspondence of Richard Richardson*, Yarmouth, 1835.

** Wyndham's and Earle's grand tour is referred to in *A Family History 1688-1837. The Wyndhams*, by H. A. Wyndham, London, 1950.

†† The political dissensions in Geneva between the oligarchist government and the democratic elements led to the intervention of the guarantor powers, of which France, siding with the government of Geneva, endeavoured to cow the democrats by means of a military blockade.

‡‡ The duc de Choiseul.

§§ Pierre-Michel Hennin.

||| Versoix.

narrative and who accompanied him on the journey to Chamonix was not Henry Penruddock Wyndham, but probably Joseph Wyndham who had been with them in Italy.

In the following transcription, the numbered footnotes are the author's ; my footnotes are marked by asterisks, daggers, etc.

A PICTURESQUE VIEW OF
THE GLACIERES, OR ICE MOUNTAINS, &C. IN SAVOY

[With a Beautiful Engraving.]

HAVING observed in your last Magazine an extract from *Sir William Hamilton's* Letters on Volcanos, I cannot but think and hope you will not altogether disapprove of a subject in your next, by way of contrast to that of a burning mountain ; for which reason, by permission of the writer, I have transcribed for your perusal, a genuine letter I received from him a few years since out of Switzerland.

Certain it is, that nothing increases lustre so much as opposition ; if therefore your prior account of Vesuvius, with its rivers of fire, should give a double chill to my rocks of ice and snow, they, in their turn, may perhaps add a degree of relative warmth to even that much celebrated Volcano. Both objects are, in my humble opinion, equally grand and formidable in their respective ways, and on that account may be equally interesting to such of your readers, whose taste and relish may have a bias to these great and uncommon works of nature.

Here (at *Lausanne*) am I sat down with a full design of giving you, my dear friend, a very long, and, I fear, as tedious an epistle, after I shall have dragged you over the many frightful precipices that lay in the course of our late excursion from *Geneva* to the *Glaciere* Mountains of Savoy, on the whole one of the most extraordinary scenes, perhaps, among the many others, that have ceased not to feast our eyes since we have been abroad. But the whole of our circuit, of near 150 miles round to this city, was so full of natural wonders, co-operating with such a variety of circumstances, that you must excuse me if I do not at present feel myself the least inclined to abbreviate my journal on so noble a subject. The joy, besides, of having your kindred spirit as an attendant, will help to alleviate my fatigue, and assist my cautious steps in remeasuring the same tremendous tract of country, which has so lately employed my attention.

Our mules and guides are prepared, and we will now suppose ourselves setting forth, as I in reality did, with a sensible and agreeable friend of mine on the 20th of last month (July, 1767) from *Geneva*, and passed the first stage as far as *Bonneville*, thro' a pleasant open country, with the river *Arve* in our sight the whole way. From hence the mountains closing by degrees, formed at last, beyond the small town of *Clausa* (from the Latin *clausa*, undoubtedly) a narrow pass that seemed to forbid all farther progress to the curious traveller. The whole space of this deep valley, shut in by lofty rocks, was for several

miles occupied by the road and river only. This rocky scene at length spreading on each side, left us in a large oval space, surrounded with corn fields, pasture land, and every sort of verdure, in the heart of which stands the town of *Salanche*, where we lay the first night; a night, on many accounts, not easily to be forgotten.

A most execrable inn received us, indeed, but barely covered our heads from the impending thunder storm which had been gathering the whole evening, and at midnight broke forth from tenfold darkness:— with a horror (in this mountainous region) beyond imagination dreadful, but as I shall have future occasion to take notice of other grand storms of thunder, the effects of which were singularly striking, I shall omit expatiating on this, but will proceed on our journey, expecting to reach *Chamounis* the next evening, near which village lies the principal *Glaciers*.

Was not my present a very favourite theme, I should be quite out of breath in merely relating our tedious winding path that conducted us up in the space of three hours to the summit of the lofty *Montagne de Passy*. Here we were obliged to cross several torrents which came rushing down from the mountain tops covered with snow; but beginning to melt at this season, occasions a deluge of water, which precipitately, and almost perpendicularly, continued falling down the mountain side on our right, till the whole joined the *Arve* below. Let us here pause a moment, and contemplate the scene around. All is surely enchantment and fairy land. Cones of mountains piled one above another, and feathered with firs to almost the very tops, seemed to touch the skies, and bounded the vast amphitheatre before us. But see! the heavens again wear a threatening aspect, and we are glad to hasten our descent into the neighbouring valley, and seek shelter within the bosom of those thick woods, or rather within the precincts of yon lonely hamlet, that we from hence o'erlook at that depth, and which we seem to be the first discoverers of, so totally excluded does it appear to lie from all intercourse with the rest of mankind. We here, however, found some of our own species; but in external form, at first sight, not promising to afford us the entertainment, as well as generous hospitality, which we afterwards experienced in their wooden cot, where their all (little as that was) the honest owners at once laid at our feet, and dedicated to our service.

Super omnia vultus

*Accessere boni, nec iners pauperque voluntas.*¹

The singularity of their mansion attracted our particular notice, and is worthy of taking up a few lines in this epistle. It was built wholly of fir planks (as are indeed many we afterwards saw in this country) but placed upright, and constructing one circular room, analogous to our glasshouses, tho' in miniature, (being properly speaking, all chimney) with a funnel on the top, thro' which descended the only light they enjoyed, save that of one dim lamp constantly burning before a small

¹ Ovid, *Met.* 1. 8.

Crucifix, (for they were good Catholics) and by which aperture ascended the smoke of the little whivering flame, kindled on a hearth, in the middle of their hovel. This served to warm the meagre broth of our poor but contented wife, his host, and six beautiful children, who, though almost naked, and with their hair flowing over their shoulders, quite in a state of nature, carried a native smile and bloom in their countenances, seldom seen, perhaps (but with the assistance of art) amidst the daily cares and midnight dissipations of crowded cities.

Whether the milk diet of these Alpine boors, or the purity of the air which these Mountaineers constantly breathe, be the cause, I know not, but certain it is, these Savoyard Peasants of both sexes are as healthy, stout, and handsome a race of people as can be seen,—and, *entre nous*, seem as prolific as the very goats they tend. How happy were we to have even such an asylum as the above, from the tempest of thunder and lightning—which returning in the evening, made us resolve to pass the night here, though on a bed of straw! But we reflect with double pleasure on our present security within this sequestered retreat (despicable as it might appear elsewhere) and here defy the rude wind.

That by the top doth take yon mountain pine,
And make him stoop to the vale.²

celsae graviore casu

Decidunt turres, feriuntque summos

*Fulmina montes.*³

Whilst the eye is prohibited ranging within the enclosed depths of such profound solitude, the mental faculties naturally expand, and seek employment within their own sphere, and pensive (I will not say unpleasing) ideas are the first that as naturally arise; ideas, that at this time one would not for the world relinquish, or give in exchange for the very best attainable among 'the busy hum of men.'

We were assured the next morning, that the ten miles to *Chamounis* were, if possible, still more steep and rugged than any we had passed before; but whether we☞☞, who had so lately climbed over Alps and Apennines in Italy, began now to be inured to these difficulties, or reason had just intimated to us, that patience on these occasions was a medium, thro' which all human evils appear diminished, we, on the whole, thought the account our Cottagers gave us a little exaggerated. A stony mountain path, on a gradual ascent, soon led us thro' a wilderness of firs, till we opened on a plain covered with verdure, and arrived at some straggling houses, little better than that we had left, but which they called a village, and honour with a pompous appellation. Mountains still on all sides above us, and pines without end. Thro' the evergreens in front we just catch the first peep of one of the *Glacieres*, pendant as it were from the declivity of yon mountain, which they have justly entitled *Mont Blanc*. The top is clad in a sheet of

² Shakespeare's *Cymb.*

³ Hor. 1. 2. ode 10.

☞☞ Presumably including Joseph Wyndham.

snow, almost too white for the eye to look on, and which unites in the view with the rocks of ice below. The sun, which is not yet risen with us in this *valley* (relatively speaking) gives a double splendor by reflection to the tops of those snowy peaks, that shine like burnished silver.

Arriving at last at *Chamounis* (a large village) a certain Priest*** became the good Samaritan, who received us under his roof, where we were sure to meet with the best of every thing the country afforded, the produce of which was very well adapted to an English palate. The banks of the rivers, tho' in the heart of this Alpine tract, are cloathed with the finest verdure, which serves for pasturage to a thousand head of cattle. The very best cheese, butter, and bread are made here, and every sort of fruit succeeds to perfection in a southern aspect at the foot of these mountains ; so that at present nothing seemed wanting to fortify the inward man against the undertakings reserved for the following days.

We will employ this serene afternoon, (for the black clouds that rest beneath these forked mountains, inhabit a region too high for mischief) and take a survey of the wonderful natural beauty and sublimity that dance hand in hand within the confines of this spot. Let us try, therefore, to climb the eminence of yon rock, jutting out above those tufted trees, which on a nearer approach we find to be the *Arbutus*. A straggling *Chamois* goat or two leading the way, pointed us out a path that would not have been at all eligible without these guides, and even with them was somewhat hazardous. Surely that little goat-herd boy, blowing his wild notes on the horn, which echo through the mountains, has placed himself in the cavity of yon lofty crag for the sole purpose of our entertainment ! What an effect is produced by these slight incidents, which in a less romantic place might perhaps pass disregarded !

A curtain of shade had now began to spread over the valley, but the western sun ceased not to gild the mountain tops till three hours afterwards. This village we are told is scarcely blessed with his all-cheering beams for a full month before and after the winter solstice, so immediately do these lofty Alps hover over their heads. *Chamounis* itself is certainly far above the level of the lake of *Geneva*, being near the source of the *Arve*, which river, after a winding course of no less than a hundred miles, I suppose, empties itself into that lake. Hence in part proceeds that agreeable freshness of the air at this warm season of the year, unless it may more reasonably be attributed to the vicinity of such mountainous piles of ice and snow.

All the seasons of the year are here comprehended in one view. The corn below is now almost ready for the sickle : but mark those little patches of wheat above us still clad in green. One can scarcely imagine how the culture of such places (from their situation excluding all assistance from animals) should in any degree answer the industry

*** Jean Baptiste Galley, *chanoine* of Sallanches, was *curé* of Chamonix from April 20, 1754, until June 15, 1774, as M. Paul Payot very kindly informed me.

of the laborious farmer, who here leaves no spot, that has a foot's depth of soil, uncultivated. Every flower that summer produces is seen flaunting in the warmth of the lower grounds. On ascending the next day, we plucked the vernal Snow-drop, Crocus, and Narcissus, that proclaimed the temperature of spring. And behold! in the bleak winter of those summits, what an infinity of pines, the hardy natives of the North, are now waving their graceful tops, and flourishing in beds of snow :

*Where the rude ax with heaved stroke
Was never heard, the nymph to daunt,
Or fright them from their hallowed haunt.*⁴

But the setting sun now summons us to retire to the house of our hospitable Priest. Three hours are imperceptibly stolen away since our eyes and imagination have been so attentively engaged.

Before the sun rose the next morning, our impatience to visit the astonishing scene of never-thawing ice prompted us to set out on foot with guides, and soon beginning to ascend, we continued our progress upwards by a steep path amongst innumerable pines for four hours incessant. About half way up, indeed, we rested ourselves a little on some natural seats of stone, in which interval I must not omit the picturesque circumstance (however trifling it may seem) of a flock of milk-white goats that at this time chanced to be winding their way down the mountain side, in order to drink at a neighbouring fountain that flowed from the rock. Others brouzing on the mountain sweets, skipt and leaped from one precipice to another, with an indifference and intrepidity that made one almost shudder at the consequence of one false step. Our favourite Virgil, if you recollect, has not thought it beneath his notice to introduce a similar piece of imagery, when his pious hero was scouring the Carthaginian mountains in quest of game, before the fatal storm drove him to a rencounter with her Tyrian Majesty in the cave.⁵

At the distance of half a mile from the ice, a sudden chill in the circumambient air indicated our approach to some strange and unusual climate. Picture us now descending upon these stupendous cliffs of ice, that seem to have stood there from the foundation of the world, filling up the whole space for a mile in breadth, between long parallel chains of mountains, whose tops shoot up to the heavens in a thousand broken and uncouth shapes, all hooded with snow. This scene, however dreary and unpicturesque it may look to the eye of a painter, has merits peculiar to itself, and altogether exhibited a most noble assemblage of the Vast, the Wonderful, and Wild. To the curious Naturalist it certainly affords an inexhaustible fund for speculation.

⁴ Milton's *Il Penseroso*.

⁵ Postquam altos ventum in montes atque cavia lustra,
Ecce ferae Saxi dejecti vertice caprae,
Decurrere jugis.

Æn. IV, 152 & seq.

Tho' we had ashes to strew, and staffs with pointed ferrules, the attempts to cross the *plain* of ice (for so it at first appeared) was really two [*sic*] formidable. What we imagined at a little distance to be only a trifling ridge thereon, on approaching we found an insurmountable height of perhaps an hundred feet—so deceiving are those magnitudes, when compared by the eye with the superior ones of the mountains impending over them. Add to this those terrifying chasms and dreadful depths cut by the streams of snow-water that pours down from above in cataracts, of which I counted fifteen in number. If water will work its way thro' stone itself, which it is very well known to do, no wonder that it so easily penetrates the yielding substance of ice.⁶ One of these interstices, which we remarked was almost circular, and is called *a well*, we were assured was of an unfathomable depth. 'Not many years since (said one of our guides, with a shrug, and looks expressive of the deepest concern) an unfortunate brother of mine, who rashly ventured on this slippery footing, too near the brink of one of these horrid channels, suddenly fell down, and instantly slid into the gulph in sight of his companions, who could give him no assistance, and was from that time never more heard of. Observe that neighbouring Cross, added he, erected to perpetuate the memory of this fatal event.'††† The custom of fixing up Crosses, or little Oratories, on these melancholy occasions, is common to all the Catholic countries, I believe, and I am sorry to say too many of these dismal memorials present themselves in all the dangerous mountain passes throughout Italy, but particularly on the maritime Alps, west of Genoa.

As near as it was judged safe, we stood contemplating the wonders of these icy rocks, to which, as we looked up, one could almost fancy ourselves wedged in between the vast billows of some frozen ocean, north of Nova Zembla, where a sudden congelation taking place, had

⁶ The colour and texture of this ice induced me to think that its original *primaeval* state was snow. But I shall not presume to risk any hypothesis of my own towards accounting for the natural formation of these wonderful objects, phaenomena that I never yet read a solution of that was satisfactory to myself, I must refer those who would see an enlargement on this subject, to Scheutzer's *Itinera Alpina*, Altman, M. Hottingher, &c., who have professedly written thereon, but particularly to a late work, entitled '*Histoire Naturelle des Glacières de Suisse*,' in 4to, with many copper-plates, translated from the German original of M. Grouner, who has therein ingeniously collected the substance of all the preceding authors.

N.B.—*The View in the annexed PLATE bears the nearest resemblance of any we could meet with to the Glacier of Chamounis here described, and will serve, we hope, to give the reader as good a general idea of this strange species of object, as the nature of a PRINT will allow.*

††† M. Paul Payot has kindly informed me that the accident here referred to was probably that which occurred to Jean-Pierre Maillard in 1757. His death certificate reads as follows:—'Die vigesima septima Septembris et anni millesimi septingentesimi quinquegesimi Septimi [obiit]. Descendens de monte Bayer morte improvisa et infeliciter per Rupes [cadiit] joanes petrus filius Nicolai Maillard e pago Despraz qui sine sacramentis sepultus est Die sequente quinqueginta quinque annis circiter natus.' The Montagne de Bayer is opposite the Montenvers on the east side of the Mer de Glace.

fixed them for ever immovable. Was it at all a feasible scheme, how much I should have liked to have traced these Glaciers to their very source in the superior parts of the mountains.

Mr. *Sausseur*, Mathematical Professor at Geneva, well known in the philosophical world, in company with some other gentlemen of that University, were at that time, ††† as we were informed, actually two days journey above us, and had there pitched their tent, in order to explore those unfrequented and impervious regions.⁷ But unless their courage had been equal to their curiosity, nothing I think could have tempted them to climb and tread those inhospitable deserts, never surely before this impressed by human footstep, or even that of a goat.

Non homini regio, non adeunda ferris.

Where is the mortal that dares profane with impunity the ancient purity of yon white-rob'd jagged peak, that towers so far above those dark clouds? Amongst the frigid horrors of such invincible heights, old *Hyems* himself alone seems to hold his despotic sway, wielding his icy sceptre 'midst the undisturbed solitude of eternal snow. One's blood runs cold, and freezes at the very idea. 'Tis high time, therefore, to promote its circulation again, by a glass of generous wine, on a good foundation of meat and bread, that we all enjoyed round an enormous mass of ice, which (by the way) was a very treacherous substitute for a table. We drank to the success of the bold philosophical adventurers aloft, censured their presumption in attacking these Alps without *Hannibal's dissolving vinegar* (mentioned by Livy, and the gravest Roman historians) and then turned our backs on this valley of desolation.

In order to vary our route, we returned down a steep pathless brow of the mountain, and continued constantly descending for above two hours together. At the extremity of this descent, a grand and advantageous view of the lower part of the Glaciers presented themselves. From hence numberless cascades of snow water, that violently gushed out from under the ice with the noise of a rushing wind, precipitated

⁷ The chief object of their enquiry, as we afterwards learnt, was concerning the state and power of the electric fluid in so great a rarefaction of air at that height, for which purpose they had carried up with them an apparatus of instruments.

††† The whereabouts of Horace-Bénédict de Saussure during July 1767, are known from his letters to his wife: *Lettres de H.-B. de Saussure à sa femme commentées par E. Gaillard et H.-F. Montagnier, Chambéry 1937*. On July 21, with his friends Jean-Louis Pictet and François Jallabert, de Saussure returned to Chamonix from the Brévent where they experienced an electric discharge. On July 28 they left Chamonix for St. Gervais. The intervening days, it is now clear, were devoted by de Saussure and his companions to an expedition up the Mer de Glace which revealed to them the fact that the interior of the chain of Mont Blanc was a vast reservoir of snow which gave rise to the glaciers flowing to the north and to the south, between high and apparently inaccessible granite peaks from which stones constantly showered down. This is the expedition referred to in para. 637 of the *Voyages dans les Alpes* to which Earle's narrative allows the dates July 22-24 to be attributed.

themselves in a perpendicular fall of some hundred feet. The head of the foaming river *Arberon* [*sic*] (which falls into the Arve) rises at the foot of the mountains within an immense cavern of ice, that looked transparent like chrystal, the vaulted aperture of which we guessed to be at least fifty yards high, but could not come near it by a quarter of a mile, so rugged was the way, and so freezing were the frequent gusts of cold wind that issued from its icy jaws. Other circumstances here conspired to drive us to a still greater distance. For, on a sudden, down falls a monstrous fragment of ice, at once cleft asunder, and severed from the rocks above, and in its fall was dashed into ten thousand pieces, with a crash scarcely to be conceived, and from the reverberation among the hollows of the mountains, literally resembling a clap of thunder. This incident, as alarming as it was unexpected, seemed to us novices a preparatory stroke as it were to the approaching dissolution of the whole mass, till we were calmly acquainted by our guides that such and worse were very common for a month or two after mid-summer, when the height of the sun, added to the strong reflection of its rays from the sides of the rocks, triumphs a little over those parts of the ice that overhangs the precipices.⁸ This seemed at first the more astonishing to me, who last year, on the top of Mount Aetna (as I have described to you, I believe, in a former letter) observed the opposite elements of snow and fire, in close union, as it were; the first remaining indissoluble, by a fire, which in turn rages unquenched amidst an eternity of snow. Except on our expedition to the extreme summit of that famous Volcano, I think we have never, in the course of our foreign tour, done so much in one day as we have in this. We shall, therefore, be glad to repair again to our lodging, where the day's exercise invited us to a sound sleep, interrupted only by dreams on Iceland and the North Pole.

The good sense, joined to the good nature of our Mons. le Chanoin, of whom we made every inquiry which our present situation and eager curiosity naturally suggested, tempted us to trouble his house another day, which was partly spent in renewing our walks about the romantic environs of the village, and in penning a few indigested notes that I am now using, as the rough material of this account. On parting the next morning, the honest Vicar gave us his benediction and prayers for a prosperous journey over the precipices that were ready to receive us, but not till we had offered him his Sardinian Majesty's picture in gold, which he thought not proper to refuse, tho' from the hands of Heretics.

I do not, my friend, half like the looks of those clouds that so early begin to involve the heads of the distant blue ridge before us. More than once have I experienced such (light as they look at present) to have been the parent of most dreadful thunder. But we must stand

⁸ Before the Autumnal Equinox it generally begins to snow afresh towards the mountain tops; so that the acquisition of snow and ice during the winter months recruits a hundred fold the trifling loss sustained from a partial dissolution by rain water, or the preceding summer heats.

the chance common to all itinerants, and brave wind, weather, precipices, and banditti. The latter, which we hear infest these mountains, are the most formidable opponents we could encounter, as our pistols I doubt would be of little service against a gang of villains who here seldom rob without murder; a word (by way of consolation) just whispered to us by the young fellow who attended us in the shape of a *Cicerone* from Geneva. But in spite of all, proceed we must.

Winding for some hours thro' a green valley, almost wholly overshadowed by the mountains, we pursued our course many miles on the banks of a rapid river, which forced its passage with such foaming violence along the rocky channel, that its waters were fretted to the whiteness of milk, and the noise and wind arising from it so great, that one could scarcely hear the sound of one's own voice.⁹ The stream at last making an abrupt turn to the left, suddenly vanished for a time, and we soon found ourselves enclosed amidst an intricacy of a thousand pines of an amazing height and size, thro' which our mules now began to climb for two hours by stony stairs (for I cannot better characterize it). In the midway of this artificial path, not being a yard wide, and scarce admitting the mules to pass, we opened all at once on such a scene, the very idea of which, to this moment, turns me giddy! Perpendicular rocks of an unmeasurable height, with vast firs hanging almost horizontally over us, rose on our right. Shall we venture to turn our eyes to other way, and once more look over the frightful precipice into the close valley beneath?¹⁰ Of what a gloomy and tremendous depth! By the imperfect light that can reach us from the bottom, the eye is just able to discern the whiteness of the river, and the ear to distinguish a faint and distant murmur of that roaring which below almost deafened us. This grim gulf seems to yawn, ready to swallow up for ever all that falls within its merciless power. See! half ways down, the trunks of fallen pines rest, suspended as it were together with huge masses of rocks, tumbled from the height above us.

*I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
Tumble down headlong.*¹¹

Must we go forwards for some ways still on this brink of horror? To the right or left, answered our guide, no retreat offers, you see, and an impossibility for the mules to turn. A peasant of *Chamounis*, who conducted us thus far, here failed not to cross himself most devoutly: '*Malgré moi,*' says he, '*moi qui passe ici deux ou trois fois la Semaine,*

⁹ The degree of impetuosity of these mountain streams (depending chiefly on the supply from above) varies almost regularly with the vicissitudes of the season.

¹⁰ Whoever has seen these sort of vallies among the Alps, will at once pronounce, I believe, that nothing less than an earthquake could have thus rent these solid rocks asunder, where oftentimes (not unlike the famous fissure in the cliff of Gaieta, in the kingdom of Naples) the concave parts of one side exactly tally with the convexity of the opposite one.

¹¹ Shakespeare's *K. Lear*.

il me fait trembler.' The path, however, gradually bending from the precipice, but still on an ascent, first conveys us across some tottering planks, that form a fallacious bridge over a mountain torrent, and then places us again within the labyrinth of a black forest of firs (*le Bois noir*, so called). And hark! above, with how melancholy a roar does the furious wind howl thro' their rocking tops? The impenetrable gloom besides, that reigns beneath, leaves the imagination in doubt to conceive what creatures are savage enough to be its inhabitants, and none but wolves and bears immediately present themselves in idea. With the former it seems these mountains abound, and the large fires that have often caught our eyes in the night time about the Alps, are lighted up, we are told, by the wary herdsmen to terrify those ravenous animals from their flocks.

This sylvan scene retained its solemnity the whole way to *Trian*, a name given to a few cottages scattered about amidst the wilds of this Alpine district, which lies almost in the heart of that range, called the *Monts Maudits*, or Accursed Mountains, in the centre whereof *Mount Sempion*, and *Grand St. Bernard*, rise as joint Monarchs above all the rest. So bright is the snowy pinnacle of the former, (though at least a hundred miles distant) that the deception makes it almost appear to be one among those that form the neighbouring horizon. Over these two lead the only passes out of *Lombardy* into the west of *Switzerland*.

Both our mules and their riders now beg to recover their breath a little at one of those cottages, where we received a second specimen of the generosity and benevolence of the common *Savoyards*.

From hence climbing over the broad bare back of another mountain, we are soon enveloped in a dense cloud that rested thereon¹²; from whence emerging, we are all at once surprised with a view of the Rhone wreathing its serpentine course tho' the distant valley of *Sionne*, beyond *Martignac*.

*Spumanti Rhodanus proscindens gurgite campos.*¹³

To this little town lying at the foot of these mountains, by one uniform inclined path for six long miles, we are bound this evening. The giant features of the *Pais de Valais* in front are seen from this point in almost a bird-sight view. But behold! a scene of a more interesting nature may detain us on this spot some time perhaps, and at present claims our close attention. Storms, in spite of fate, will happen; yet, if we were ever cruel enough to wish for one, it was surely now. Let us then, from the accidental security of our elevation, look down and enjoy the elemental conflict that is thickening below. The aether has savoured of sulphur the whole day past, and those black clouds are now floating

¹² In our passage over Mount Cenis, about three weeks before, a very odd appearance of clouds occurred. These, instead of involving us in obscurity hung suspended just over our heads, like a vast canopy, by which the rays of the sun were wholly intercepted immediately about us, but the prospect was seen from underneath this thick bed of mist on all sides quite distinct.

¹³ *Sil. Ital.*, III. 449.

big with horror. And see ! they begin to discharge their fury on yon castled cliff, against which blue flashes are darting fiery forks, and rattling thunder instantly bursts from the veil of darkness, which broods over that plain, and those affrighted herds of cattle. Torrents of rain rush down, hail bounds from the rocks, and the concussion of the lower air causes even the mountain top on which we stand to tremble.

Insolitis tremuerunt motibus Alpes.

I am really at a loss to determine whether the sound or the sight be the most horrible. But with all the increased terror of thunder in our Alpine situation, I cannot but still secretly hope, that the wind will direct its force westward, and place it immediately under us. This wish (presumptuous as it is) I cannot for my life suppress, on recollection of a relation I lately received from the mouth of one of the most communicative and well-bred Philosophers I ever met with, I mean Father *Beccaria* of *Turin*.¹⁴ In his frequent peregrinations about the inexpressible heights of the Alps N.W. of the *Piedmontese*, in the *Duchy de Aoust*, he told me he had more than once seen lightning engendered in a whirlwind beneath his feet, and the deep valley under him wrapt in obscurity and smoke, at the time that his station in the skies was covered with the brightest sunshine.¹⁵ The strongest expressions (continued he, with an accent descriptive of his Italian sensibility) and every verbal effort, how totally inadequate are they to the most faint description that can be given of the singular circumstances attending such thunder storms !

Pardon me, I entreat you, if I resist not the temptation of here repeating the first stanza of Mons. *de Fenelon's* inimitable Ode, which the present occasion recalls to my memory.

*Montaignes, de qui l'audace
Va porter jusqu'aux cieux
Un front d'éternelle Glace,
Soutien du séjour des dieux :
Dessous vos têtes chenues
Je cueille audessus des nues,
Toutes les fleurs du printems ;
A mes pieds contre la terre
J'entends gronder le tonnerre,
Et tomber mille torrens.*¹⁶

¹⁴ His publications on Electricity, which the ingenious author was so kind to make me a present of, are some of the very best we have.

¹⁵ These storms are for the most part only local, and die in the same place nearly that gave them birth. At other times, from being at first partial, they gradually extend, and become entirely general over the whole hemisphere, and at length creeping up the mountain sides, degenerate into a thick mist, and settle quietly down on their tops.

¹⁶ The mountains which the author herein so poetically addresses himself to, are those of Auvergne, a French province, where the learned Prelate of Cambrai spent some part of his youth ; but his expressive description is equally, if not more applicable to the inconceivable dignity that prevails throughout the Alps.

I will still farther encroach, with the following imitation :

*Ye mountains, whose aspiring tops
With snows on snows ascend the skies,
And, as the everlasting props
Of heav'n's high mansions proudly wise ;
Oft on your hcary heads,
I've gather'd their beds
The flow'rs that spring doth blow,
While thunder rock'd the ground,
And torrents swell'd the sound,
And clouds were seen below.*

The direct reverse, indeed, of the last mentioned phaenomenon is more common among the Alps and Apennines, from whose tops, whilst all has been sunshine and tranquility below, I have myself frequently seen vast lumps of snow suddenly carried off, and violently bolted from crag to crag by adverse currents of air in those lofty aerial regions, where the combustion sometimes has not ceased, till it had actually worked up a tempest. The snow thus detached, is soon hurried down by its own gravity, and in rolling, increases to such size, that in its descent has been known to choak up all the passes, often filling whole vallies, and burying the unfortunate passenger underneath its accumulated mass.¹⁷

Within an hour, the rage of the storm that we had been treated with, was borne away by a hurricane into a neighbouring valley, in a different direction to our descending path, which led us down safe to *Martignac*, where we thought ourselves lucky in having seen, and not felt, the effects of its violence.

But since we are now fairly secure within our snug *Auberge*, from all snowballs and thunderstorms, tho' still encircled by the *Monts Maudits*, what should prevent us joining the jovial dance yonder with those *Lillies of the Valley* that are wheeling their rounds with those rosy youths of the village, on 'the dry smooth shaven green.' We have had so much of the terrible sublime lately, that we begin to sigh again for a taste of the beautiful. No rain has here moistened the earth. The rising moon begins to illumine the village spire. The *Tamburella* and *Sampogna*¹⁸ whisper their soft accent to the evening breeze, and all is festivity and joy. The girls of this country are remarkably handsome, their hair gracefully braided, and decorated with flowers, and their dresses in most respects similar to those that are too apt to attract man's wicked eye among the artificial shepherdesses of the theatre.

¹⁷ Amongst the various difficulties and dangers attending Hannibal's leading his troops over the Alps how pathetically has Silius Italicus, in his third book, described this as not one of the least, where he says,

' haurit hiatu

Nix resoluta viros, altoque e culmine praeceps

Viventes turmas operit delapsa ruina.'

¹⁸ Musical instruments much in vogue in this part of the world, as accompaniments to their dance.

But we must break by force from the infatuating wiles of these syrens, and pursue the prospect before us, 'nor cast one longing, lingering look behind.'

We are at present without the verge of his Sardinian Majesty's dominion (how much do the vile maps we have of them lead us astray!) and we will follow the Rhone along this broad and fertile valley, till it falls into the eastern part of the lake of Geneva. Had I not seen at least three-score cataracts within this week past, I should not refrain from the pleasure of dwelling a little on one of the most capital of all, which we soon arrived at in our road. It fell perpendicularly near us in the form of a vast brush of water, of at least 250 feet in length, which swept along the valley by the high wind, and raising a spray like the smoke of a furnace, thoroughly soaked our thin summer cloaths, and almost wet us to the skin as we passed. In the flying particles of water a vivid and perfectly circular rainbow was formed before us, and added not a little to the general effect of the picture.

I must really begin to lay an embargo on my impertinent pen, which if left to itself in this country, will run riot, I find, beyond all bounds. For this reason I must omit mentioning the *Salines*, or Salt Springs, near *St. Maurice*, within the Canton of Berne, that we visited by a narrow subterraneous passage of nearly a mile long, each of us habited in his souterrein jacket, and each with a torch in his hand. I could perhaps harangue a great deal on this place, and hold forth with the affected wisdom of a *Charlatan* for at least an hour, on the nature of fossil salt.

The town of *Aigle* afforded only three excellent things, viz. good wine, a luxurious featherbed, and a *jolie fille de chambre*. From thence we traversed the eastern borders of the Lake, the extreme part of which is full four-score miles by water to the city of Geneva, and at this end as much environed by lofty mountains as the *Lago Maggiore*, in the *Milanese*, to which it bears a great affinity. Its smoothness and transparency, the morning we were coasting it, transported me at once back to the unruffled mirror of the lake *Albano*, in the *Champagna* of *Rome*, or that of *Nemi*, its neighbours, which, you know, is emphatically called the *Speculum Dianae*.

At *Vevey*, a pretty town, the walls of which were washed by the pellucid waves of this beautiful lake, we dined the last day of our expedition, in the evening of which we safely arrived here. From hence, to-morrow, we are setting out for the eastern cantons, and then with all convenient speed thro' a part of Germany, and down the Rhine, to our justly beloved native country, whither I trust that the same good providence, which has hitherto conducted us safe over mountains of fire, as well as mountains of ice, will guide our wandering steps before this summer expires.

We will now both dismount from our mules for the present. What farther remains but to hope these tedious sheets will at length find their way over still many a mountainous horizon, and safely salute the hand of one who, I flatter myself, will not sink again under the fatigue of this his ideal journey, more than he who has in reality taken it; but

who being (too much perhaps) animated with his subject, and idly imagining every one else to be as great an enthusiast as himself, may falsely consider brevity and tameness, in such epistolar cases, as synonymous terms. Great reliance, however, is to be placed on the friendship of a man, who knowing me and my particular humours, will be the more easily induced to make allowances, and look with a favourable eye on all the defects of his

Very sincere friend, and humble servant,

W. B. E.

The time-table of Earle's journey was therefore as follows :—

20 July 1767	..	Geneva to Sallanches.
21 „ „	..	Sallanches to Passy.
22 „ „	..	Passy to Chamonix.
23 „ „	..	at Chamonix ; visit to Montenvers.
24 „ „	..	at Chamonix.
25 „ „	..	Chamonix to Martigny.
26 „ „	..	Martigny to Aigle.
27 „ „	..	Aigle to Lausanne.
28 „ „	..	Lausanne to Berne.

Earle followed Wyndham and soon caught him up, for on 16 August Wyndham wrote from Cleves : ' Earle joined me the third day after my arrival at Strasburg.'

It may be added that when de Saussure came to England in the following year, he was the guest of a Mr. Earle, of Benningborough Hall, in Yorkshire§§§ ; but he appears not to have been William Benson.

§§§ D. W. Freshfield : *Life of H.-B. de Saussure*, London, 1920.