RUSSELL AND THE VIGNEMALE

By ROBIN FEDDEN

FEW areas have been as devotedly pioneered as were the Central Pyrenees, a century ago, by Packe and Russell. Without maps, with no guide but instinct and a compass, they navigated like sailors among the unknown reefs and glaciers. Their first ascents are numberless; it was *their* country. Though close friends who climbed often together (' mon ami Packe ', the phrase recurs like a refrain in Russell's writings), and fellow members of the Alpine Club, they present a marked contrast and express two fundamental, but very different, approaches to mountaineering, the scientific and the romantic.

Charles Packe (1826–96) was geologist, botanist, cartographer and scholar (climbing with Horace in his pocket). He was also the squire of Stretton Hall, the Leicestershire gentleman who found the Pyrenees more exciting than the hunting field. Much of this was concealed by a brusque manner, for though a modest man he was perhaps not an easy one. He began his systematic exploration of the chain in 1859. When his companion was killed on the Pic de Sauvegarde in the same year, while no doubt perturbed, he was clearly not deflected. Noting Jurassic limestone, greensand, names of rare flowers, barometric pressures, and making in uncharted country expedition on expedition, he accumulated knowledge. It found expression in the first guide-book to the Pyrenees and the first map of the Maladetta area. At this remove the methodical explorer, ' the Tyndall of the Pyrenees ', allows a single welcome glimpse of the eccentric squire: on solitary expeditions he roped with Ossoüe and Azor, his great Pyrenean sheep-dogs. Thus, a hundred years ago, but surely in ill-placed confidence, he crossed a frozen tarn, and perhaps negotiated the ice-fields of the Aneto.[1]

Writing in this JOURNAL, Russell referred to Packe as ' master, model, and leader ', yet because of his own passionate attachment to a single mountain he is today the more vividly remembered of the two. Born in France, and heir to a papal title, Count Henry Patrick Marie Russell-Killough (1834–1909) was an Irish Catholic. These facts are less important than his admiration for the works of Chateaubriand, Lamartine and Byron, and his love of mountains which he always saw in some part through their eyes. His life was a late but heroic expression of the romantic era. From that era both his literary style—for he had weird but considerable talent as a writer—and his attitudes derived

[1] Better known by its French name, Néthou.



CHARLES PACKE

By courtesy of Lt.-Col. E. C. Packe, D.S.O., O.B.E.

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Count Henry Russell

much of their bravura. Charm, generosity, passion, eccentricity, created his legend; there have been many less well-founded. As a young man he wrote verse, played the fiddle, and would dance all night ('effréné valseur' they said) before starting on a thirty-mile walk at dawn. His romantic daemon sent him briefly and disastrously to sea, and led him in his early twenties happily across Siberia, to Australia, to New Zealand (where he was lost for three days in the Alps, alone and without food), to the Americas, and even to within sight of Everest. On his return in 1863, at the age of twenty-nine, he first climbed the Aneto and met Packe. The rest of his life was, quite simply, devoted to the Pyrenees.

The range provided a focus for his romanticism and brought him something like European fame. He made at least sixteen first ascents, and it is in character that many of them should have been solitary. On the other hand his contribution to the scientific knowledge of the chain was negligible. It would have been illogical to expect otherwise. In his writings, above all in *Souvenirs d'un Montagnard*, he made a different contribution, an urgent and eloquent apology for an emotional approach to mountains. The Pyrenees that claimed him were not Packe's. 'Je respecte', he wrote, 'et j'envie ceux pour qui la montagne est autre chose qu'une idole. Je suis jaloux de ceux que la géodésie, l'anatomie des pics et l'éclimetre, passionnent autant que la voix des torrents, la pourpre des précipices, et l'incendie des neiges au coucher du soleil. Mais à chacun son rôle. . . . Le mien fut de marcher et de sentir.'

The Count's almost obsessive feeling for the Pyrenees found its most satisfying expression in his relationship with the Vignemale. This reads like some complicated love affair. Rising in the Grande Vignemale, the highest peak of the French Pyrenees, to 10,820 ft., provided with the most shapely glacier in the range and some of the most forbidding precipices, the mountain held him from childhood. He reached its summit thirty-three times, making his last ascent at the age of seventy. Long before then he had felt the need to achieve a closer and more prolonged contact with the Vignemale than was possible by mere mountaineering. Nothing would satisfy but a home not far from the summit, where he could if necessary live for days at a time and know his mountain in all seasons, and in storm as well as settled weather. The idea of building among palaces of ice, schist, and marble, seemed ridiculous and impertinent. A grotto was the only acceptable solution: 'une œuvre humaine, mais qui n'en eût pas l'air, et où on ne devinerait pas la main de l'homme: en un mot un abri qui eût l'air naturel'.

No one knew better than Count Russell that a grotto was not to be found on the Vignemale. He decided to carve his own from the solid

rock. In the summer of 1880 he began to look for a site, and in the course of his search spent the night of August 26 on the Grande Vignemale in very curious circumstances. As light began to fail, his two companions, peasant-mountaineers from Gavarnie, were instructed to dig a grave upon the summit. Then, laid out in his sheep-skin bag, he gave orders for his burial. Having covered him to the neck in a cumbrous blanket of stone and soil, his companions retreated to shelter some way below. With a vivid anticipation of pleasure, the Count awaited the night and the cold. ' L'ami Packe ' one feels would hardly have approved such eccentricity.

A few hundred feet beneath the buried Count a still and level sea of cloud stretched from horizon to horizon. At times he seemed already to have left the earth and to be floating above it; at others to be watching from a last rocky eminence the earth's slow and final inundation. When the moon rose shortly before midnight the ocean of cloud, as though the light infected it with fever, began to stir and shudder. There was now unceasing agitated movement that threw up plumes of grey spray and hurled breakers against invisible shoals. Yet the cloud level did not rise; even, as the night wore on, it began to sink and like the retreating Flood rendered up one dripping summit after another. All this apparently in a windless silence, as frightening and unnatural as death. The temperature dropped to —3° C. and a hoar frost whitened the grave and the Count's pointed beard. What, he wondered, would have been the effect on some benighted mountaineer, chancing to find on such a summit a frozen decapitated head? Madness, he concluded, and fell asleep.

This night may be regarded as the last dedicated vigil of his novitiate; it was prelude to long and arduous possession of the mountain. The chosen site for his grotto was in the wall of rock that bars the head of the Ossoue glacier at 10,500 ft. The vagaries of the glacier were later to present an unexpected challenge; meanwhile for two summers there was a coming and going along its crevassed length of peasants and miners, carrying explosives, wood and food. The haul was made from the village of Gèdre over 7,000 ft. below, and the Count always superintended from the most advanced positions. Sometimes the glacier was in thick mist and they moved slowly, step by step among the gulfs. Sometimes plastered in falling snow, the flakes large as florins, they looked like white statues. Sometimes they fought foot by foot against the wind. More than other mountains in the range, the Vignemale has a reputation for great storms. They dossed down, all of them, under a large heavily-tarred canvas. Tools broke, the explosives got wet, but by the beginning of August 1882 the grotto was ready.

The first night was spent there with his friend, Francis Swan, later a member of the Alpine Club. They slept comfortably on hay;

without a fire the temperature was 7° C. In the following year Miss Swan became the first lady visitor. The owner was beginning to settle in. It is curious to watch the splendid obsession grow, the sojourns in the grotto multiply in number and length. Three days, four days, ten days. . . . He makes neighbours : the snow finches begin to rely on his visits. From his doorstep, he saves two young English mountaineers, lost and exhausted, who have fallen into a crevasse. Mass is celebrated in the grotto by the Abbé Pomès. Some of the thirty who attend kneel on the glacier outside and the snow about them is reddened by the dawn. Soon a single grotto is not enough. In 1885 the *Grotte des Guides* follows, in 1886 the modest *Grotte des Dames*. The possession of the mountain seems complete. As though to celebrate the fact an extraordinary scene is later enacted, recalling an Arabian banquet displaced in temperature and altitude. The Comte de Monts (significant name) appears with friends and a capacious tent rises on the glacier before the grottoes. Columns sculptured in frozen snow flank the entrance and the approach is a lawn of red lichens, *silene acaulis* and *androsace carnea*. Persian carpets are spread and white napery. They decant vintage wines and carve a huge *jambon de Bayonne*, looking in its coat of fat like a great marble boulder ; reclining on cushions they burn oriental perfumes and long Havana cigars. There is not air enough to sway even the lanterns and for three days the barometer is steady.

But the Vignemale demanded more of this Irishman, whether as lover or hierophant. In 1887 the glacier began to stir, as the cloud ocean had stirred, but it slowly rose against the rock face, lapping steadily higher. The lower grottoes disappeared like foundered ships. Only the *Grotte des Dames* remained accessible. With unbroken spirit but something like a broken heart, the Count withdrew to just under 7,900 ft. There in 1888 at the foot of the Ossoue glacier a new grotto was hollowed out of the mountain. *Bellevue* faced south, and a spring for the first time made him independent of melted snow-water. Two ancillary grottoes followed. With their Freudian overtones, there is something desperate about these penetrations, these determined acts of love. With the object of veneration now 3,000 ft. above, *Bellevue* seemed like the plain, and Russell sat there longing for the harsh glare of snow, the lammergeiers, and the summit heights. By 1892 his position had become intolerable ; the more so since the mountain had now for some years been *his*. The seven surrounding communes had shown the imagination to legalise his relationship, presenting him with the four summits of the Vignemale and the glacier that flowed down to his door.

To seal a devotion that one can only admire he determined to build his last and seventh grotto at the summit of the Grande Vignemale

itself. Four men worked for over a month in vain. Only when he brought up dynamite in 1893 was the thing accomplished and the Count lodged at nearly 10,820 ft. *Le Paradis* also faced south and proved beautifully dry. It was the reward of a long and ardent attachment, surely one of the most intense in the history of mountaineering. There, in his sixtieth year, he celebrated in his own phrase the ' silver wedding ' of his first ascent.