

WHAT HAPPENED AT KIENTHAL?

KIENTHAL? Kiénthal? Does the name recall anything to mind or have we already forgotten that Bolshevism was hatched in that nest?

I spent last year at Kiénthal, merely as a tourist, however, for I had entirely forgotten that it has an historical interest attached to it. This fact was brought to my remembrance through a long paradoxical discussion with my travelling companion on the question as to whether or not we have a right to put an end to life. We all know the problem by which medical men are sometimes faced, that is—is it permissible for a doctor, whose patient is suffering from an incurable disease and whose end is inevitable, to spare him further atrocious sufferings by hastening that end? But is it necessary to encourage doctors in such a dangerous practice, do they not, of course without evil intent, kill off enough people as it is? Or would it be a duty to hold out a saving hand to a dangerous bandit who, when climbing the mountains, lost his footing on the edge of a chasm? Would it not be easy to turn aside and become absorbed in the scenery, very beautiful by the way, and well worth looking at? A little incident told us casually by our guide—not that we needed a guide to cross so easy a pass, but we wanted our bags carried—just missed setting the discussion ablaze.

I went to this valley, one of the most peaceful and least known in Switzerland, in search of rest. Starting from the Lake of Spiez you quit the line of Lœtchberg at Reichenbach and follow the length of a torrent by a winding way impracticable for cars. No noise, no dust, only an infinite peace reigns over pastures and forests as you climb slowly on. Kiénthal is a pretty village situated at about 4,000 feet of altitude in the midst of calm yet wild scenery and closed in by a wall

Blackfriars

of rock and pines, above which appear the snowy heights of the Blumlisalps, almost as fine a group as that of the Jungfrau. But I did not remain at Kiénthal: I pushed farther on. This wall appears to be impassable, but the path cuts into it, seems to lose itself, and finally opening out, discloses a gorge into which the wonderful cascades of Pochtenbach, Hexenkessel and Dundenbach come thundering down. Ah! how difficult those dreadful names are to pronounce! I remember that my friend, René Boylesve, whom I had invited to join me here, drew back at the last moment appalled by such syllables. 'No,' he wrote sadly, 'such geography would not be good for my health.' He preferred the Vendômois country and gardens. And yet these *moulins de glacier*, as they are called, where the water turns round and round hollowing out regularly-shaped funnels, are of extreme and romantic beauty. With one more effort to get out of the gloomy gorge you reach Griesalp a stage above, separated from the world, at the foot of the near group of the Blumlisalp, whose summits you can count as well as the rocks of the Wilde Frau and the glaciers of the Weisse Frau. Travellers in search of quiet amongst the mountains, or who wish to venture the ascent of the summits, will find there a good hotel, built in the form of an enormous *châlet*, which is well known to lovers of winter sport as well as to summer Alpine climbers.

After two or three days' rest in a valley I have always begun to wonder what there can be behind the mountains, for however high and steep the barriers of rock may be, they soon make me feel as if I were in prison. But when the summits that dominate them are nearly 14,000 feet high, and youth is passed, is it worth while risking one's neck merely for the pleasure of gazing into space? However there are the *Cols* (or necks) and they are the consolation of Alpinists

What Happened at Kiénthal?

of mature years, for by means of these *Cols* they can get around the obstacle and be suddenly met by the view again opening out before them. On the other side, well! there is the Jungfrau Group; and there is Mürren, the playground of dangerous sport. How I long, suddenly, to see Mürren again, so dear to lovers of bob and ski!

You go there by way of Sefinenfurgge, but you have to complicate your itinerary a little by passing the night, without any special reason, in a hut—try to remember its name if you can—the Gspaltenhornhütte, which is built against the rocks of the Büttlassen. From there you cross over the side of the Büttlassen and you arrive at the Col. It is an enjoyable and easy little climb over rock and snow, and your exertion is more than rewarded by a view of which the eyes can never weary, for they travel from the imposing range of the Blumlisalp to the incomparable group of the Jungfrau, of the Mönch and of the Eiger, to rest farther still upon other white phantoms such as the Wetterhorn. The descent of the Col du Géant to Chamonix, with the opening up of all the peaks, that of the Trift to Zermatt, opposite the Cervin, the Mont Rose and the Mischabels, are not more dazzling and resplendent. Once again I experienced the enthralment of white solitudes, pure air and the glorious peace of the summits after the exhilarating contest of the ascent which had been one of the joys of my youth. In this immense, luminous dining-room we lunched.

It was then that the guide, before he would allow us to make the descent to Mürren, told us his little story, and yet it could hardly be called a story; it was an insignificant anecdote of something that had happened in his guide life.

One of my companions was recalling a happy and beneficial stay he had made at the hotel of the Griesalp, and said he had known there a neurasthenic lady

Blackfriars

who was so much in love with the mists that she only cared to go out when there was a fog. Consequently she often got lost and a search had to be made for her. One day she was found wandering just above one of the famous cascades whose rhythm had fascinated her, but she showed no gratitude to her rescuer. Was she not, after all, mistress of her own fate?

'Yes,' intervened the guide, 'it must have been above the Falls of Dündenbach, because I, too, rescued a traveller from there. He was a queer fellow, a foreigner, a German, or more likely a Russian.'

Guides while in pursuit of their calling naturally become familiar with all the different nationalities.

'Was it long ago?' asked one of the party, not much interested in what the answer might be.

'During the War. It must have been in the Spring of 1916, in the month of April, because snow and ice were still about. The man had slipped, he was hanging over the water only holding on by his hands, he could not climb up and was calling for help. But no one heard him on account of the noise.'

'I happened to pass that way. I saw him, I climbed up and seized him by the arm. Just in time! The next moment he must have fallen. When we were out of the scrape he looked at his hands that were red and bleeding, then he rubbed them together, chuckling all the time. At last he said in German:

"You have done a great thing; you will hear more of me by and bye." But I never have heard more of him.'

'Did he tell you his name?'

'No, he did not. I knew he came from Kiénthal where there was a great mustering of foreigners at the Hôtel Baer, although it was not in the season.'

'At Kiénthal, at the Hôtel Baer, in April 1916! By Jove! my friend, you saved either Lenin, Radek or Trotsky! You would have done far better to let

What Happened at Kiénthal?

him fall over, for your rescued man has caused the fall of innumerable heads; so are not you, too, a little guilty?'

But the honest Swiss face showed no comprehension of the paradox nor of the joke. A guide who holds out his hand across the abyss is only following his calling, and even if it had been a question of saving Lenin, could he have hesitated?

And was it Lenin? It certainly was not Lenin. In all probability it was one of the other Russian revolutionaries, for the Russian revolution was brewed in Switzerland, and it was touch and go that there was not a revolution in Switzerland as well.

It was very near it on the 10th and 11th November 1918, while the Germans were entreating for the armistice which should put an end to the war. The attention of the world was diverted from these facts; but, to-day, history should carefully collect them.

Thus the generosity, or the weakness, of the Federal Council of Berne, under the pretext of respect for the opinions of others, allowed the International to begin, or carry on, freely its work of destruction.

A first conference was held during the summer of 1915 at Zimmerwald, a charming little village in the Bernese Country: nearly all the Russian staff were already there, Lenin, Trotsky and Zinovief; while Switzerland was represented by two Socialist delegates, Naine and Grimm. The name of Grimm, who was always agitating, should be retained in order to understand through his career how easy it is to pass from Socialism to Communism and finally to revolution. Lenin was then living at Zürich, from there he directed the propaganda, for it was at Zürich that Bolshevism was elaborated, and even then they were preaching desertion from Army and Navy, and against national defence.

Blackfriars

But though the Conference of Zimmerwald, followed by another held in the Casino at Berne, are well known and talked of and even quoted in various manuals, the one held at Kiéenthal, important in another sense, is too often passed over in silence. It was kept far more secret, yet it was there that the momentous resolution was taken definitely to abandon the minority programme for Bolshevism or the majority programme.

It opened on the 25th April, 1916, in the unobtrusive and rather pleasant little hotel *l'Ours*; forty-five members were present, among whom were Mme. Angelica Balabanof, Lenin, Radek, Munzenberg—Naine, Platten and the reputed Grimm for Switzerland—Brizon, Blanc de Vaucluse and Guilbeaux for France. The proprietress of the hotel told me that these illustrious visitors spent five days there drinking tea and smoking day and night. The meetings were carried on till two or three o'clock in the morning and on the last night they worked without ceasing. Lenin did not appear to play the principal rôle, or maybe he was pulling the strings of the puppets and allowing them to be under the delusion that they were the leaders, while he contented himself with keeping the secret control in his own hands.

Madame Balabanof, on the contrary, made herself very important. She presided over the meetings again and again with a face illumined as that of a visionary. Sprung from an obscure middle-class Russian environment, she finished her studies in Germany and while there became infatuated with the doctrine of Karl Marx. On this account she was suspected in her own country and therefore went to Italy to work there for the Socialist cause and for a certain time she collaborated with Mussolini in work for the paper *Avanti* of Milan. This was before Mussolini's bold stroke in favour of Italian nationalism. In her

What Happened at Kiénthal?

Memoirs, which appeared recently in German, Madame Balabanof vilifies her former employer, and disdainfully describes the Swiss as a nation of lower middle-class people. Nor does she spare the Russian revolution which, since the death of Lenin, has deviated from pure Communism, re-established the distinctions between the classes and abandoned Marxism, so dear to herself. It is easy to imagine her at Kiénthal frantically stirring up their energies while she drank innumerable cups of tea. The one who listened to her with the closest attention must certainly have been that Robert Grimm who was anxious to get sent off to Russia, and who hoped for the German triumph in the war.

There is no doubt that the departure of Lenin and his gang was resolved upon at Kiénthal. Monsieur Vierne in the *Bibliothèque Universelle* for May, 1918, relates how 'in two parties, at an interval of a few days, the present masters of Russia, her disorganisers and the signatories of an infamous peace, reached the Swiss frontier in carriages specially prepared for them, crossed Germany, entered Russia and accomplished the disastrous work known to the world.

It would be of interest to read a little pamphlet that came out at Lausanne, '*Les troubles révolutionnaires en Suisse de 1916 à 1919*' par un témoin (this witness is Colonel de Vallier) which gives account of the events that followed the return of Robert Grimm to Switzerland and of the Communist propaganda; this pamphlet by no means controverts the anti-militarist campaign. Nor must we forget the reports of General Nivelle and, later on, those of General Pétain, of this same campaign in France which resulted in the disturbances of May-June 1917 after the repulse of the attack of April 16th. They denounced the nefarious work that was being carried on behind the lines against which no action had been taken. Colonel de Vallier

Blackfriars

quotes, as an inscription to his pamphlet, these words of Gustave Le Bon's: 'The principal cause of the increasing progress made by anarchy amongst the masses is always the weakness of governments.' And he points to Switzerland, more and more infested by suspicious undesirables, unruly fanatics, vague idealists, phrase-makers and men of superficial education, old offenders, deserters, rebellious subjects, provocative agents and spies.

'They swarmed at Zürich, at Berne, at Lausanne and at Geneva. At Zürich they held their meetings at the *Café Pan*; here they proclaimed the pacifism of a new age—*put an end to the war of nations so that class war may begin.*' The results were not long in forthcoming. In November, 1917, Zürich was already the theatre of violent disturbances, but it was in November, 1918, that Berne and Zürich just escaped the infection of the revolution. Another agitator, named Platten, who like Grimm and been to Russia, had brought back with him the opinions of Lenin, who saw in Christianity the principal enemy of the International.

The great obstacle to the revolution, however, was the Army which, mobilised in August, 1914, had faithfully kept the frontier and remained undemoralised by the long wait to which it had been subjected, though they tried in a thousand different ways to disaffect it. It had at its head a remarkable chief, General Wille, who from the beginning had realised the danger and had kept up a strict maintenance of discipline, whereas the Federal Council had allowed itself to be dominated by the two centres of revolutionary propaganda, the Committee of Olten presided over by Grimm, and the Soviet Legation at Berne. Grimm could with impunity threaten a general strike, and the Soviet envoy, a Jew of the name of Berzine, had turned the legation into a Bolshevik laboratory.

What Happened at Kiénthal?

Finally he and his staff were expelled from the country.

Everything was now ready for a revolution in Switzerland. It was to break out on the 10th and 11th of November, after the proclamation of the general strike; but the foresight of General Wille, clearer than that of the civil authorities, who were always too generous or too weak—it is sometimes difficult in politics to distinguish between generosity and weakness—and the stability of the army prevented it.

Berne and Zürich were put into a state of siege and almost the entire country, at last awakened to the danger it had run, ranged itself on the side of its defenders.

At that time the army (though ravaged by the Spanish influenza, to which thousands fell victims), ill and tired out, was particularly meritorious in suppressing the outbreak with patience and resolution combined.

General Wille, in his despatches of 20 November, 1918, was fully justified in congratulating it in these words: 'In accomplishing this painful duty for the maintenance of order with the same devotion as you showed in guarding the frontier for four years, you have proved that you are ready and willing for any sacrifice to assure our rights and our democratic liberties at home, as well as to defend our independence abroad.' Such is this curious and little-known page of the history of Switzerland so endangered at the end of the War. But I shall not know, I shall never know, which of the Kiénthal Bolshevists our guide rescued at the Falls of Griesalp.

HENRI BORDEAUX.

(Translated by RAY GALLIENNE ROBIN).