

The King Albert Memorial Fund

A Memorial Fund has been founded by climbing companions of the late King Albert of the Belgians who, on February 17, 1934, lost his life in a climbing accident. For the last 20 years His late Majesty had been an ardent mountaineer, undertaking—partly guideless—some of the longest and most difficult rock-climbs in the Alps.

The object of the King Albert Memorial Fund is to provide help for destitute dependants of climbers of all nationalities killed in the Swiss Alps. The fund has been founded with the consent of the Belgian Royal Family and the Belgian Alpine Club. It is a most suitable memorial to one who was himself an active mountaineer, and it is to be hoped that all climbers and all those who have sympathy with Belgium will support this fund as generously as possible. All communications should be addressed to Dr. Walter Amstutz, St. Moritz, Switzerland.

Albert I, King of the Belgians

TOGETHER with Belgium, and with Europe, our Club mourns the passing of a personality which added dignity to kingship, no less than honour to the mountain realm.

As a ruler, patient, dignified and wise, wholly concerned with the understanding of the character and of the problems of his countrymen. Deliberate in preparation, resourceful in counsel and resolute in performance, in a very special sense King Albert was the leader of his people ; for, interpreting his office of ruler as that of the chief servant of the state, his service was to lead it both in peace and in war with a like unswerving sense of duty and a like constant and considered courage. In war, tenacious, serene, personally intrepid to the point of heroism, he won the admiration of his country—of all our countries. In peace, in a small territory and under no easy circumstances, he built up a tradition of stable governance and of honourable personal guidance which has stood secure as a structure, and in always clearer outline as an example, among the stormy political moods and social precipitations which have changed so many of the governments of Europe. As the head of a state, he will be remembered as an outstanding instance of the gradual but, in the end, victorious influence of high, disinterested personal character. Using none of the arts of demagoguery and, apart from a commanding presence, gifted with none of the externals of magnetic leadership, he dominated by an intrinsic high-mindedness and by the weight of an accumulating, well-guided experience. In return, even in his lifetime, his reign came to be invested by his people with the affectionate and patriotic pride and much of the glamour which are attached to legendary figures.

And this perhaps the more because, as a man, he was democratic and self-effacing : assertive only in the tranquil

determination with which he maintained his rights as an individual citizen to domestic privacy and to an unquestioned liberty of private action.

That, born with the mountaineering heart, he should have exercised that right of personal discretion to continue his climbing of mountains well on into later years, refusing to be bound by the tradition which would insist upon 'safety first' as the principle for kings, can be more easily understood—but will be none the less admired for its unique independence of judgment—among us who also climb. Believing as we do that mountaineering is the best preparation for manhood, the best guardian of fitness and readiness for leadership, we can the better appreciate the sustained purpose and practice by which King Albert kept himself disciplined and trained as a man for his arduous work as a king. Fatigue, difficulty, danger, hardship, the greater for his height and for the temperament that goes with heavy proportions, he spared himself no lesson in endurance, in nerve and in temper which the hills can give. As a result, and at an age when most men, of lesser responsibilities, are seeking quieter leisure, he preserved a vigour of personality, with a freshness of enterprise and an almost boyish enthusiasm, such as no severity of circumstance could diminish and—a far keener test—such as no incongruous incident or accident could rob of its imperturbable dignity and composure. As a result, also, he was able to meet the political and racial crises of his country, and of Europe, with a clear eye, a firm will and a healthy sanity of judgment, that kept him as much master of the situation as he had become of himself.

Three pictures in memory may perhaps, better than many words, illustrate his personality and the constancy of the principles by which he lived. In 1914, when his kingdom had been reduced by invasion to a mere strip of sandhills, King Albert still refused to consult his own safety, or even to join his ministers behind the French armies. He remained among his own soldiers at the front, in continuous personal danger. And in the evenings, in the parlour of a small wind-swept villa among the sand-dunes, the tall uniformed figure would sit discussing the ill news of the day or some gallant or humorous instance of individual courage; resuming, after each wilder gusting of the wind and sea-spray or each louder clamour of the

guns, with the same deliberate articulation and the same stately detachment. Again, but a few years ago, he was to be met making a difficult ascent in the Chamonix Aiguilles, incognito, conspicuous, rock-rent and perspiring, among his devoted guides ; but with an unconsciousness of himself, a happiness of concentration upon the work in hand, such as create a new atmosphere of sovereignty about every genuine child at play and every whole-hearted youthful adventurer. And again, in this last year, the king was visiting the new giant cranes on the docks at Antwerp ; and he was escorted up the interminable open ironwork stairs and ladders by the manager : a dignitary who had been wounded and expatriated as a child and introduced to climbing, at that time, by some English mountaineers. When, panting upward behind the king's stalwart and rapid ascending stride, he recalled this earlier experience apologetically, the king looked back gravely at the portly breathless figure and remarked, with a twinkle in his eyes, ' You should have kept the profitable lessons incidental to the war better in mind ! '

Even as the lesson of his life, the tragedy of his death must bear for us mountaineers a meaning which has escaped more general recognition. Its manner was wholly consistent with the principles by which, as man and as king, he lived. As an Alpine mountaineer he must have known the dangerous character of the rocky, vegetated pinnacles by the Meuse. But, holding the view he did, that climbing is the finest preparation and safeguard not only of physique but of character, he had thrown himself with his customary self-devotion and singleness of purpose into the exploration and exploiting of these cliffs, which seemed to offer a home climbing-ground for his native land and his people. Characteristically, also, as man and as king, he took upon himself the pioneering work, and the personal risk. As definitely, and as purposefully, as he hazarded his own life in war, to save not only the territory but the self-respect of the people entrusted to him, King Albert of the Belgians sacrificed his life, in peace-time, for that which he had decided could best profit their health of body and mind.

There may come other mountaineering kings—he has set the example. But there will never be a more kingly mountaineer, or a more noble gentleman.