

## THE LANDSLIP OF MONT GRANIER IN 1248

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OPPOSITE Aix-les-Bains, across the Lake of Bourget, rises the Dent du Chat, its name derived from a legendary monstrous cat that once roamed the forested slopes, and which was finally trapped and killed by Merlin, the magician, in the train of King Arthur, passing by on the way to Italy. Queen Hortense of Holland stood on the summit in 1810 and viewed the sunset on Mont Blanc.

Towards the Mont Cenis Pass are the Aiguilles d'Arves, peaks so venerated in prehistoric times that the dead were buried with their feet towards them.

Between these points the road from Chambéry to Montmelian passes the hamlets of Chignin and Myans, respectively east and west of the valley, as shown on the early seventeenth-century maps of Blaeu and Hondius. Along this way came the early travellers to the Mont Cenis and the Graian Alps, traversing the foot of Mont Granier, northern outpost of the Grand Chartreuse massif, its rampart towering 4,000 ft. above the stream. In the year 1248 a mass of the mountain fell in the greatest landslide recorded in the Alps.

There is a startling woodcut in Hartman Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493, with the upstretched arms and terrified faces of a multitude of people vanishing between closing walls of rock curling above them like waves of the sea. The destruction of Plurs in the Val Bregaglia<sup>1</sup> in 1618 by a fall from Monte Conto, which left but four absentee survivors out of 2,000; and the fall of the Rossberg<sup>2</sup> in 1806, covering four villages, including Goldau, were lesser disasters.

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Myans, the 'Black Virgin' where the landslide was arrested, is situated on a hillock and is still visited by many pilgrims. De Saussure,<sup>3</sup> who examined the area in 1790, mentions that in the nearby Franciscan convent there was once a painting of the catastrophe. Two devils, who assisted in creating the havoc, are depicted with words inscribed on scrolls issuing from their mouths. One calls to the other: 'Push on to Chignin,' the village on the other side of the valley. The second demon replies: 'Do you not see that Our Lady of Myans prevents it?'

Robert Bakewell,<sup>4</sup> the geologist, writing in 1821, says: 'A part of this mountain [Mont Granier] fell down in the year 1248, and entirely buried five parishes, and the town and church of St. André. The

<sup>1</sup> B. Studer: *Geschichte der Physischen Geographie der Schweiz* (1863), p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> K. Zay: *Goldau und seine Gegend* (1807).

<sup>3</sup> H. B. de Saussure, *Voyages dans les Alpes* (1779-96), III. § 1181.

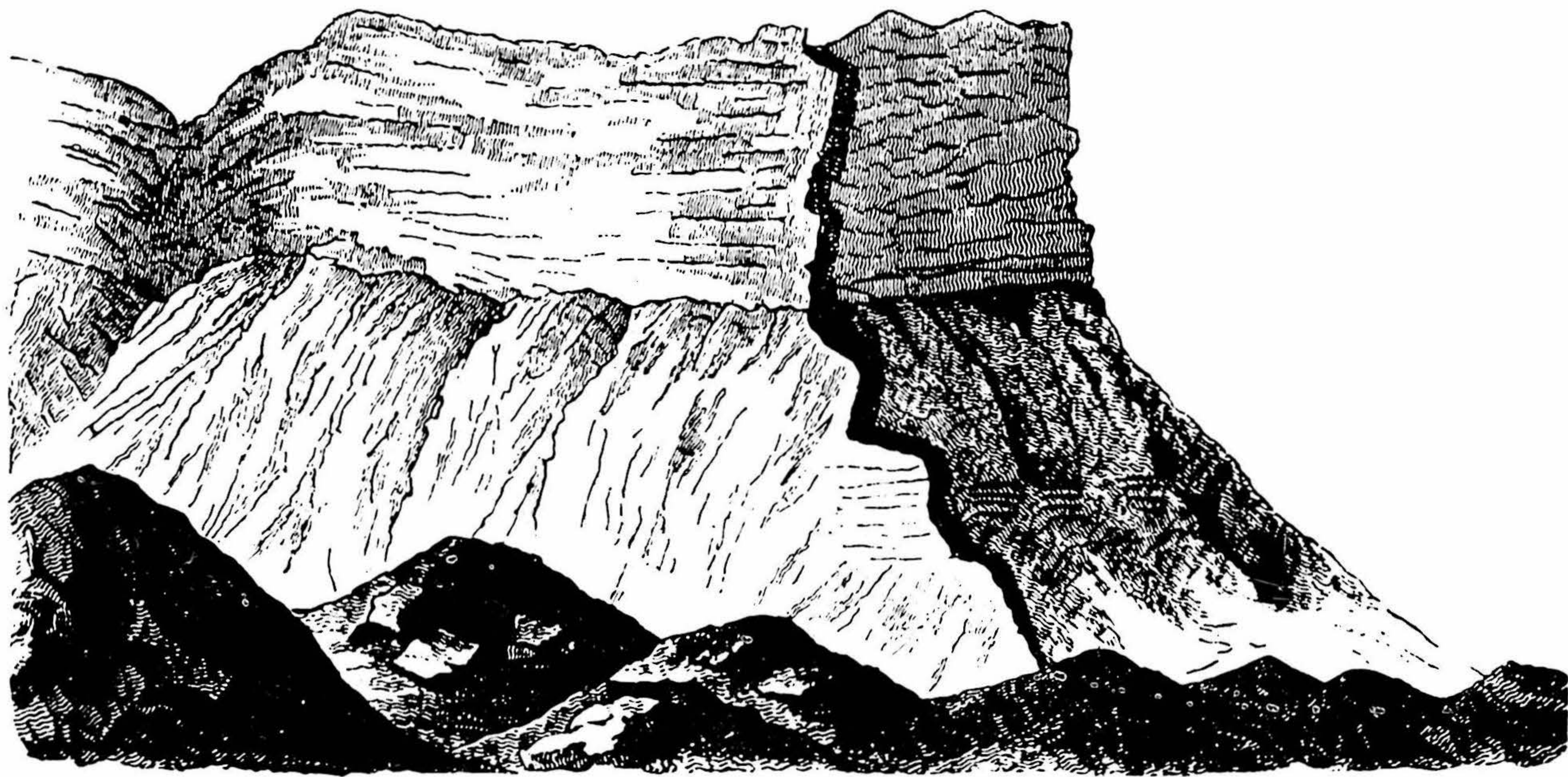
<sup>4</sup> R. Bakewell: *Travels, comprising observations made during a residence in the Tarentaise* (1823), I., p. 195.



Éboulement du mont Granier en 1248.  
Bois de la *Chronique de Nuremberg* (1493).

THE LANDSLIP OF MT. GRANIER (*Nuremberg Chronicle* 1493).

[To face p. 316.]



MONT GRANIER AND THE ABYMES DE MYANS (BAKEWELL, *Travels in the Tarentaise*, 1823).

ruins spread over an extent of about nine square miles, and are called *les Abymes de Myans*. After a lapse of so many centuries, they still present a singular scene of desolation. The catastrophe must have been most awful when seen from the vicinity; for Mont Granier is almost isolated.' Bakewell describes the débris as being composed of hills of conical shape 20-30 ft. high, made up of fragments of calcareous shale, some of which are of immense size, once in the upper bed of limestone by which the mountain is capped. The greater part is now planted with vines. He estimated that the fall contained upwards of one hundred and fifty million cubic yards, some of the pieces being projected four miles, and noted that there remained a cleft in the mountain almost 2,000 ft. deep, threatening a repetition of the slide.

There was apparently an earthquake in 1248, felt across Europe and even in England. The S.E. angle of the mountain gave way and the fall destroyed the town of St. André and other villages with a total population of 6,000.

Here is one version<sup>5</sup> of the occurrence as it appears in ancient chronicles: 'In order that he might seize their goods, the seigneur of the place banished the monks of the convent of St. Benoît. On the night of November 24, 1248, whilst the monks were taking refuge in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Myans, watering the pavement with their tears, and imploring the help of the "Black Virgin," a terrible storm arose accompanied by an earthquake. Mont Granier cracked asunder, and a part breaking away buried the whole of the plateau and its inhabitants underneath the débris. It stopped, however, in front of the chapel of Our Lady of Myans, where the monks were at prayer before the statue of the Virgin. When the wicked lord and all the other inhabitants had been engulfed, the monks heard Satan inciting the evil spirits to complete their work of destruction, saying, "Plus loin, plus loin encore, détruisez la chapelle," to which they replied, "Nous ne pouvons pas car la Noire nous empêche. Elle est plus forte que nous."'

Matthew Paris, the chronicler, regarded this as an intervention of Providence to spare the chapel. Bakewell, the geologist, six centuries afterwards, more realistically held that its security lay in its relatively elevated position. Legend, as usual, offers the more entertaining explanation.

<sup>5</sup> E. Canziani: *Costumes, Traditions and Songs of Savoy* (1911), p. 102.