

THE EARTHQUAKE IN SWITZERLAND IN 1855

[Slight earth tremors are not uncommon in Switzerland but a bad earthquake causing considerable damage, particularly at Visp, occurred in July 1855. T. W. Hinchliff records¹ that he arrived at the Hôtel du Soleil at Visp a month after the earthquake and 'found the house shaken from top to bottom, every wall split, mortar and stones brought tumbling to the floors, most of the rooms quite uninhabitable and the proprietor himself looking like Marius among the ruins of Carthage. This calamity appears to have ruined the town; . . . the two churches suffered grievously, the whole interior of the roof of one had fallen, crushing everything in its way; railings, seats, organ-loft, and altar-steps, all had been destroyed, and the main walls cracked from top to bottom'. Amid all this damage the only casualty was a little child, crushed by a falling rock.]

St. Nicholas suffered even more than Visp, while Stalden, between the two, escaped with very slight injury.

The tenth (1863) edition of 'Murray' records that the shocks began on July 26 and continued at intervals for several months. Only seven houses in Visp were left in a habitable state. The Poste inn suffered severely and nearly all the ceilings in the town fell. Whymper, passing through in 1860, found that numerous traces of the shocks still remained.

There recently came to my notice the following contemporary account of the catastrophe which is reprinted from 'The Leisure Hour' of January 17, 1856. D. F. O. D.]

TOWARDS the end of the month of July in the past year, the whole valley of the Rhône was visited by successive shocks of an earthquake, at first slight, then more violent, so that even those who dwelt at some distance from the spots first affected by the convulsion, spent their days in a state of vague terror, lest the visitation should approach nearer to their own homes; and their fears were but too surely realised.

Late one summer's evening when the inhabitants of the small bourg of Viège were assembled at their doors, after the toils of the day, which had been one of the most sultry ever known, an extraordinary appearance in the sky drew the greater part of them forth from their homes, the better to watch it. Thus they were assembled, all with upturned faces watching the clouds. The stillness was so profound that not the faintest ripple of the water as it splashed into the basin of the fountain escaped the ear. The red lurid colour of the angry heavens grew deeper and deeper, while wild, metallic-coloured clouds whirled rapidly along, as if rushing on to combat. Never in the memory

¹ *Summer Months among the Alps*, p. 84

of the oldest inhabitant had the sky assumed so ominous, so portentous, an appearance, and, coupled with the alarming rumours of the earthquake which had reached this secluded hamlet, it caused the inhabitants to gaze with horror at the stormy scene. The church of St. Nicholas, its beautiful spire glowing in the angry light, was immediately before them, when all at once, in the midst of the solemn stillness, there came a sound so awful, that, as by one common impulse, the assembled crowd fell on their knees, as though that were the most fitting posture in which to await the fearful visitation which seemed to be impending. The sound was like deep, rolling, subterranean thunder. Louder and louder the noises grew, and paler and yet more pale the affrighted faces of those who seemed awaiting their doom. Then all at once, with a crash as if the mountains were riven asunder, the spire of St. Nicholas was seen to sway backwards and forwards, and fall down, torn from the main body of the building as if by a giant's arm. Who can describe the feeling of agonised terror that seized upon all the hapless gazers at this terrific spectacle! and not a moment's interval was allowed them in any measure to regain composure. Again the awful note of warning broke upon them. The earth shook under them, and then, with a terrific crash, the whole roof of the church fell in; and yet again, without even the usual warning noise, the second church in the village fell, the tower and the body of the building forming one chaotic mass of ruins. The agony of terror now reached such a pitch that all the affrighted people rose from their knees, and fled they knew not whither. Some who had children left at home, had the presence of mind to return and snatch them from the impending destruction. Screams of alarm next proceeded from the village inn. It so happened that two Swiss gentlemen, members of the government of the canton, were spending some days at the little hamlet; and, had it not been for their calm courage, and the prompt measures they took, the simple dwellers in the little *auberge* must have perished. They were driven wild with terror, and could not even summon up courage to fly, till the shaking of the floors beneath their feet, the cracking of the walls, and the rumbling noises that sounded louder and louder, convinced the Conseiller d'État Barman that if they were to be saved, no time must be lost. At length, by force—for they were in no state to listen to reason—he and his friend succeeded in placing all that belonged to the inn in safety; but their flight had been so long delayed, that the Conseiller got severely bruised by the falling timbers, as the whole upper story of the inn fell in just as he was passing through the door.

After the fall of the inn the shocks became so frequent that, impelled by one ungovernable impulse, the miserable inhabitants fled, only staying their frantic course to collect their flocks and herds, while some

few, who yet retained courage, strove to save a portion of the simple property of those who seemed turned out to perish. Can any pen, however, describe the night passed by these poor creatures? Young and old, infants just born, old people almost on their death-bed, all assembled in the meadows, some few having obtained the shelter of tents, hastily sent out from the nearest towns as soon as the fearful news reached them.

The morning dawned, but brought no change for the better. The little town of Viège was wholly destroyed, the earthquake having converted it into one undistinguishable mass of ruins. The shocks continued every quarter of an hour, then every five minutes, and at each recurrence of them the earth yawned, and many of the ruined buildings were swallowed up in the openings. The air resounded with the cries of children, the groans of men, the wailing and weeping of women, and the affrighted bellowing of the cattle, driven from their accustomed pastures and terrified by the fearful noises around them. Let but the reader endeavour to picture the scene thus feebly described, and he will have some idea of the sufferings of that awful time—sufferings converting the hitherto peaceful valley into a scene of confusion, terror, and dismay.

Such a spectacle is sufficiently deplorable, if one thinks of it as only lasting some few weeks, in the midst of summer; but when we state that no change for the better has as yet taken place (we write in the middle of November), the reader will not be able to peruse without deep interest and commiseration, the account we have yet to lay before him. We give the details from time to time, just as they reached us, in all their affecting simplicity.

August 5.—Up to this date, no alteration for the better, in the country of the Valais. The inhabitants are camped out in the fields, having before their eyes the prospect of their ruined habitations, and most imperfectly supplied with the necessaries, while wholly wanting all the comforts of life. The shocks still continue, accompanied with loud reports, which are heard three or four times in the day, especially from midnight to daybreak; they burst upon the silence of the night, destroying all hope of repose, and they are so loud as by the reverberation to shake the fragments of buildings that have yet resisted the previous concussions. The night of the 5th was awful. A tremendous hurricane burst upon the valley, threatening the ruin of the temporary dwellings in which the poor people had sought shelter. It was accompanied by the most tremendous and appalling lightning ever known in that mountain region. The whole heavens were on fire; thunder rolled in one unceasing peal, as if the very hills would be shaken from their foundation by the awful clamour; while torrents of rain fell like a water-spout upon the poor Valaisans, who were wholly

unable to protect themselves from the raging of the pitiless storm. Even in the midst of this terrible visitation, the Almighty remembered mercy, for throughout such a time of peril only one life was lost. A poor little child had strayed away from the encampment, and was crushed by a piece of rock. The day of its funeral will never be forgotten by any who witnessed the scene. Though the church was in ruins, the churchyard yet remained, filled with fragments of buildings. Followed by most of the inhabitants of the village came the little coffin, borne by the oldest peasant of the hamlet, the sounds of the reports crashing the while like heavy rolling thunder, and the ground rocking beneath their feet.

In many places the immense fissures in the rocks laid open to view rushing streams of water which, having no natural bed, inundated the valleys, and rendered it very difficult to know where to place the numerous tents. In other spots, the rivers and even the small streams overflowed their banks, from the sudden elevation of their beds while the mineral springs, supplying the hot baths at Louiche (*sic*), increased their temperature by several degrees. One singular sign in this ill-fated year had been the utter absence of rain. From its very commencement not a drop had fallen till the storm I have just described, and that was too late to save the crops. The grass crops had utterly failed; and it is fearful to think of the impending misery, as soon as the stock of hay in the country shall be exhausted, the flocks and herds being the sole dependence of the sufferers.

September 15.—During the whole of the month of August, and a part of September, the shocks continued to be felt with great violence, and always accompanied with those frightful reports which added to the terror of the people. At the end of the month of August the earth trembled, not on one spot alone, but throughout the country; and the inhabitants of many villages fled in terror, fearing to see their dwellings fall before their eyes, or bury them in the ruins. The panic throughout the country is universal, and adds much to the distress. The great mountain roads, as well as the smaller ones leading from one village to another are in many parts entirely blocked up by the rocks falling down upon them.

There is at present (November) no hope that the scourge has exhausted its destroying power.