
JOHN BLACKER

An Introduction

to 'Midnight and Dawn on the Summit of the
Great Vignemale' by Baron Bertrand de Lassus

(Plate 66)

The article which follows was brought to my attention by an American friend, Robert Maguire, who has himself been a lifelong friend of Simone, the present Baroness de Lassus. He had read the article while staying in the Chateau de Valmirande, the seat of the de Lassus family near Montréjeau at the foot of the Pyrenees. Although it had previously been translated into English and privately printed, it has never been published before. I am indebted to Simone de Lassus and her son Bertrand, the present Baron, for permission to publish it in the *Alpine Journal*. Simone is the widow of the late Baron de Lassus, who was the son of Marc, the half-brother of Bertrand, and who inherited the title when the latter died at the early age of 41 in 1909. Thus Bertrand, the author of 'Midnight and Dawn', was the great-uncle of the present baron, and was always referred to as Uncle Bertrand.

The year 1909 also saw the death of Uncle Bertrand's close but much older friend Count Henry Russell, the great pioneer of Pyrenean mountaineering, whose statue may be seen overlooking the road into Gavarnie from the north. Russell was a papal count of Irish origin, and the story of his infatuation with the Vignemale, the highest peak in the French Pyrenees, was vividly described by Robin Fedden in *AJ65* ('Russell and the Vignemale', 80-84, 1960).

Briefly, his wish to spend extended periods on his beloved mountain, the lack of any good camp sites, and the severe weather liable to be encountered, stimulated his desire for a secure shelter. There were no natural caves, and a hut, he felt, would be both an eyesore and a desecration of the mountain; an artificial grotto, on the other hand, would both be inconspicuous and fulfil all his needs. From 1880 to 1886 he had three grottoes excavated from the solid rock, at a height of about 3200m, just above the Ossoue glacier, and thus not far below the summit of the mountain. However, in 1887 the glacier unexpectedly started to rise, and eventually engulfed his grottoes. He then built three more, known as the Grottes de Bellevue, lower down below the Ossoue glacier, at about 2400m. It was from these grottoes that Bertrand de Lassus made his moonlight ascent. But they were too low to satisfy Russell's desire for greater intimacy with his mountain. So in 1892 he built his seventh and last grotto, known as the Paradis, well above the glacier and little more than a stone's throw from the summit.



66. Bob Maguire, Simone and Bertrand de Lassus on the Ossone Glacier, with the Grand Vignemale, 3298m, behind. (*John Blacker*) (p195)



67. Chuck Evans, AC ex-Treasurer, and his wife Caroline outside their Pyrenean retreat at St Jean du Castellonnais, Ariège. (*Johanna Merz*)

Russell made 33 ascents of the Vignemale, the last at the age of 70. He wrote an account of them in a little book called *Pyrenaica*, published in 1902. Curiously, his record for the year 1892 makes no mention of Bertrand de Lassus; his main preoccupation that year was the completion of the Paradis grotto. But for 1894 he wrote: '*J'y ai passé huit jours à différents niveaux (juillet), couchant une nuit près du sommet, dans ma grotte 'Paradis' (3280m), avec mon excellent ami le baron de Lassus, qui ajouta au charme de sa présence un véritable festin de Lucullus!*' Uncle Bertrand was evidently following a tradition still firmly entrenched in the de Lassus family!

Inspired both by the example of the septuagenarian Russell and by Uncle Bertrand's account, Bob Maguire and Simone de Lassus resolved to celebrate their 70th birthdays, both reached in 1994, by climbing the Vignemale. Unlike Russell, however, neither of them was in the habit of climbing mountains. Simone told me that she had once climbed the Maladetta in the days of her youth, but that was the sum total of her mountaineering experience. I therefore felt that it was an ambitious and courageous project.

I drove out with Peter Lowes to join them, arriving at the Chateau de Valmirande on 10 July 1994. This magnificent and imposing chateau was built by Uncle Bertrand in the 1890s. It stands in a walled estate of over 100 acres, and, visibility permitting, one can see the peaks of the Maladetta from its south-facing windows. That evening we drank to the success of our venture with a cognac of 1868.

The next day we left for the Bayscellance Hut. The party consisted of Simone de Lassus and her son Bertrand; Bob Maguire and his wife Polly; Jeanne Huguency, an old friend of Simone; M. Domise, an employee on the Valmirande estate and an ex-foreign legionnaire; Guy Mevellec, our guide (a Breton, rather surprisingly); Peter Lowes and myself. The path from the roadhead at the Ossoue dam to the Bayscellance Hut passes right by the Grottes de Bellevue. They looked somewhat bleak and uninviting, and we felt no temptation to stop the night there. Being on the GR10, the hut was packed, but places had been reserved for us. That evening, in emulation of Uncle Bertrand, we brewed an excellent and fortifying punch; indeed, it was made according to Uncle Bertrand's own recipe of rum, grenadine, orange juice and Demerara sugar.

We left the hut at 1am. Sadly, neither Polly Maguire nor Jeanne Huguency felt equal to coming with us. With head torches, we dropped a short way down the path, and crossed a steep slope onto the Ossoue glacier where we roped up. Guy led at a slow but steady pace which Simone, immediately behind him, could follow comfortably. We therefore took rather longer than Uncle Bertrand had done in 1892, and the sky was already lightening as we neared the top of the glacier. Passing right by the Paradis grotto, we reached the summit soon after sunrise, where more punch was consumed. The magnificent panorama of peaks and the sense of achievement, particularly on the part of the 70-year-olds, combined to make that summit one of the most memorable of my experience.