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# The Aiguilles du Diable in Winter

A Complementary Account



The Aiguilles du Diable, the Devil's Needles: the traumatic first winter ascent left a trail of cruel injury and bitter recrimination. (*John Wilkinson*)

**M**y interest in the drama surrounding the first winter ascent of the Diable ridge (see Eric Vola's 'The Devil's Needles', *AJ* 2022, pp176-93) stemmed in part from the fact that while still a beginner I had an intensive month's climbing with Christian Mollier in 1965 during leave from the oil company I worked for in Oman. One of the great routes we did, with his friend Marc Martinetti and client, was the Diable. Marc was tragically killed with Lionel Terray in the Vercors the following September. But my main interest arose while translating my wife Anne Sauvy's book *Secours en Montagne* (Arthaud 1998). In chapter XV, she discussed rescue cases that led

to litigation and referred to the Diable winter ascent. Typically, Ken Wilson immediately wanted to know all about it, as he'd found no references in English sources. So I dug around and my account was published as appendix III of the English translation, *Mountain Rescue Chamonix-Mont Blanc* (Bâton Wicks 2005).

By now I was intrigued by anomalies and inconsistencies in the various accounts and these I continued to pursue (see sources in next section, 'The Climb'). The story is, inevitably, a great deal more complicated than Eric Vola's account. Written, appropriately perhaps, in the dramatic present, Vola's version is based on three cited sources, for Raymond Lambert the *Bulletin du Club Alpin Suisse* 1939 and the section in Lambert *À l'assaut des 'quatre mille'* (1953). (Note that this latter source is the version augmented with Lambert's account of Everest. The original *À l'assaut des Quatre Mille*, published in 1946 by Editions de la Frégate, was a collection of 10 accounts recorded by Claude Varennes from Lambert. Of itself it adds nothing new, but it did give a wider circulation of Lambert's account at a time when controversy with Marcel Gallay was once again flaring up.)

For Gallay, Vola's account is solely that of 1940, *Une tragique aventure au Mont-Blanc*, a work that was supplemented in a second publication the same year with his *Étude médicale sur mes congélations*. He does not reference subsequent Gallay publications; not surprisingly as some were published during the war when Swiss affairs were not to the fore in most people's minds. However, Vola also overlooks some pre-war accounts of relevance, notably that submitted to the *Annales* of the GHM (June 1938, pp221-2) by Robert Gréloz, one of the Genevans equally involved in the rescue. That shows that one way and another some 50 people were concerned in the rescue operations during the horrendous conditions that prevailed.

In Vola's 'Aftermath' there is nothing recorded of the bitter recriminations about responsibility between the three main protagonists, let alone mention of two court cases, ending with a libel settlement in 1964. Lambert, who nearly summits Everest on the stubs of his frostbitten feet is, perhaps understandably, his hero, while poor Gallay's bitterness is satisfactorily directed at Mme Amstutz, Erica's mother, a sort of Queen of the Night figure, the only baddie of the scenario. Even so, in the accounts that are cited, there are inconsistencies that might raise questions for the inquiring mind: sleeping bags, for example, a vital element that played an essential part in determining the degree of frostbite affecting our three protagonists.

More surprising is the question he poses at the end of his 'Aftermath': 'Considering the extreme weather conditions, why did Chamonix guides agree to a rescue party?' He goes on with a veiled hint at their failure to respond to the winter tragedy that befell Vincendon and Henry. True, attempts to answer his own question may have valid elements, yet the blindingly obvious he does not see. The extreme costs paid in terms of financial loss, amputations, including some guides losing the ability to pursue their professional livelihood, meant that they had learnt a bitter lesson. They were not prepared to get involved again in further foolhardy ventures in winter conditions



Christian Mollier climbing L'Isolée in 1965. (John Wilkinson)

18 years later. That refusal in turn played a major part in reorganising the system for rescue in Chamonix, ultimately the responsibility of the PGHM, as my late wife describes in her 1998 book.

So it is, that for some 20 years I have sat on the results of my research, hesitating whether to publish or not. My prevailing sentiment was that of the editor of GHM *Annales* concerning Gréloz's 1938 report: 'This terrible ascent makes any comment inappropriate, except to pay tribute to the unflinching courage displayed by all in this drama.' So I let sleeping dogs lie. But now Vola's publication has made it imperative that this should not be the final record in a publication so influential as the *AJ*. This 'Complementary Account' is necessary to fill in some gaps and context in his account, but above all to explain the subsequent history of bitter relations that developed between the three main protagonists, however

unpleasant. None comes out clean. That is the real tragedy of the first winter ascent of the Diable arête.

### The Climb

First, it may be useful to remind the reader in a brief summary from my own notes of the climb described more fully by Eric Vola. The rescue is dealt with in a separate section based essentially on Gréloz (1938) and information from Christian Mollier of the report as recorded by the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix. On the first day, 7 February, the three climbers reach the Requin hut. On day two they reach the Borgna hut, the original at the Col de la Fourche. Next day, day three, they start the route, missing out the Corne du Diable and aiming straight for the Chaubert. The climbing goes well, the Chaubert followed by the Médiane, the only mishap being snowshoes torn off a sack. Their first bivy is a good site 10m below the summit of Médiane. At midnight the weather suddenly changes and the real trouble starts.

On day four, the problem lies in the abseil descent from Carmen to the brèche and up the other side. Gallay belays from the bivy site and protects Stagni who can help belay Lambert during these complicated manoeuvres. Sacks are hauled across a Tyrolean and one smashes into the wall: they lose all their provisions. Bypassing the Isolée they follow the ridge of the Tacul.

There, on the Chamonix side, they are hit by the full blast of the storm. They endure a terrible second bivy on the lee side, just below the east summit of Tacul (4247m). The following day, they find it impossible to descend from Tacul to Col du Midi so instead turn towards Col Maudit in a blizzard and total whiteout. Stumbling across a hole, which opens into a sort of horizontal crevasse, they improve the site and settle there. Having not eaten for two days, all they have is a bit of chocolate, three dried fruits and a Maggi powder soup plus some aspirin tablets. They bivy again, licking ice, cut up leather of a shoe to chew etc. On day six, after their third bivy, they endure more suffering, try and burn shavings off an ice axe, drink urine and endure a fourth bivouac. Lambert dubs the crevasse 'the hotel of slow death'.

On day seven there's a ray of sun and an exit. Here a degree of detail is necessary to understand subsequent accounts. In Vola's reconstruction it runs as follows. In the morning Gallay punches a large hole in the door they had blocked off with snow and ice when they first arrived and sees the sun. After digging themselves out with considerable effort they realise they are on a precipitous spot near Col Maudit, but the wind conditions are such they retire back inside. Their eventual stumbling attempt to reach the col is a failure. Back in the crevasse their attempt to enlarge it results in part of the ceiling collapsing, letting in the intense cold. They are sure that by now their Genevan friends must be looking for them. Lambert realises the only hope is for him to go down on his own. For the subsequent period until the rescue, the accounts of the wait in the crevasse by Gallay and Stagni are to be treated with reserve (see 'Discrepancies' below). What we do know is that when Charlet's team rescued Stagni, she was found wrapped in a sleeping bag, alone and naked. The horrors of that third terrible day and night in the crevasse – the fifth bivy – with everything sodden and soaked through, freezing in the bitter cold and Gallay unable to get his boots back on speak for themselves, whatever the accuracy of the accounts.

Nor is it necessary to detail Lambert's adventures on the descent, which clearly demonstrate all his best qualities. Starting off on the wrong side in bad visibility (the north side, i.e. towards the Grands Mulets) he finds himself in a maze of crevasses and has to climb back up 300m, re-passing their snow hole (but not telling them). Eventually Lambert staggers down and is spotted by one of the Genevan groups; he insists on going down with them under his own steam to the Requin, where Stagni's family physician, Dr Ody, has been sent by Mme Amstutz. On day eight the three Chamonix guides reach them and straightaway whisk off Stagni, leaving Gallay, but telling him there are others coming. Conditions are still incredibly harsh and some of the Genevans and guides renounce. But a party of Chamonix guides, Armand Charlet, Luc Couttet and Jérôme Bozon and Genevans, Francis Marullaz and Walter Macquart, reach Gallay and drag him off down). At the Col du Midi, they meet Dr Ody who has come up to join the others and gives him some basic treatment, saying he will see them at the Requin hut. But when they arrive Ody and most others have left for the valley accompanying Stagni.



An earlier image from the Aiguille du Diable, the work of guide and photographer Francis Marullaz, who was seen as the philosophical heart of the influential Androsace group. The photograph illustrated Marcel Gally's book on the 1938 tragedy. (Francis Marullaz)

On the ninth day Gally is brought down to the valley still tied to skis. He is first treated by a local doctor before carrying on to the private Clinique de la Colline at Geneva to join the other two, plus frostbitten rescuers of Stagni. The first thing Mme Amstutz says to him is: 'Ah, there you are. Are you insured?' Gally is sent to the public hospital where he is equally well treated but separated from his companions and rescuers. The trauma of that separation gives him plenty of time to brood and build up the rancour that was later to develop with his climbing companions and more immediately Mme Amstutz.

### The Climbers

The first winter ascent of the Aiguilles du Diable on Mont Blanc du Tacul in February 1938, the resulting rescue and the aftermath was, in a prominent 1947 review of Raymond Lambert's *À l'assaut des Quatre Mille*, described thus: 'In all the history of Alpinism, I know nothing which reaches the tragic horror of the chapter which complements the painful account formerly [in 1940] given by Marcel Gally.' Yet, as already shown, it is a story that is

unfamiliar to the British climbing public and the aftermath is virtually unknown, even though the history ran on and on, much as did the story of the first ascent of K2. So although the actual climb and the rescue with its resulting polemics were certainly well known in the tight world of the leading French and Swiss alpinists, the outbreak of war, the fact that Mille Stagni fully recovered and restarted serious climbing, and Lambert was able to reach 8,600m on Everest on the stumps of his feet in 1952, meant that few knew the ins and outs of Gally's bitterness. It was certainly not a matter for public discussion. Yet 12 years after being the highest man in the world, Lambert was having to sue Gally, whose leg had finally been amputated 25 years after the Diable ascent, over a circular letter he had sent round the Club Alpin Suisse (CAS) saying that for him Lambert was the lowest of the low, whatever heights he may have reached on Everest.

My early interest in the case revived when out climbing with François Damilano who was helping Lambert's son Yves Lambert tick off the 4,000ers and who recounted how Yves had recently done Everest wearing the scarf Tenzing had given to his father in gratitude. Yves proved most helpful and provided me with a photocopy of Lambert's *Carnet de courses* kept by guides, along with a copy of the judgement given in the September 1964 libel case. But the Diable ascent took place a quarter of a century before he was even born and his own knowledge of the affair was limited. So he put me in touch with two people who might help: Raymond Darbellay, whom Anne and I already knew, and Ernest Hofstetter, a good friend of Lambert who was with him on the Swiss expedition. But although very much alive, at 94 his memories of people and events nearly seven decades on may not have been of the clearest, particularly since he was not directly involved. Nevertheless, in a long discussion over the winter ascent, he clearly hinted that the young Lambert of those days was not yet the respectable figure of his later years.

To put it tactfully, his involvement with Erika Stagni was not confined to his professional activities. The importance of that observation will become apparent in due course.

The extremely important help given me by my old friend Christian Mollier of the Chamonix guides included obtaining for me the official records of the guides company concerning the rescue, as too was a discussion with Jeannot, son of Arthur Franchino, who was one of those badly frostbitten. To all these people I would like to extend my thanks for the help given. There is one other source worth mentioning, a compilation (archo-gallay.ch) containing some useful nuggets of 58 pages, *La Tragédie des Aiguilles du Diable*, put together by Alain Gallay to illustrate a reconstruction of events. If this is the same person (1938-2021) who was professor of archaeology at Geneva University, he was a nephew.

Yet the fact remains that at the end of the day there remain hidden aspects



Raymond Lambert and Erika Stagni in happier days outside the Tour Rouge hut under the Grépon, with the Aiguille Verte behind.

of the story, of guilt, of responsibility, of self-justification or pity, that we can never know. The real tragedy of the ascent lay not so much in the events, horrific as they were, but that a story of much courage and suffering shared between three friends should have finished with the bitter mutual recriminations it did.

Raymond Lambert (1914-98) was an extremely tough and pushy mountaineer. In 1934 he had done a summer ascent of the Diable with Loulou Boulaz and in the following year they were involved in the competition for the first ascent of the north face of the Jorasses. In the end they found themselves climbing the Croz spur alongside Gervasutti and Chabot, 48 hours behind Peters and Meier who had just done the first ascent. The same year he was in a party of four attempting the north face of the Dru and on return to Montenvers found Allain and Leininger who'd just made the first successful ascent, which he and Loulou repeated the following year. He had early on been attracted by full winter ascents and twice did the traverse of the Grépon (1932, 1934) and ascents of the Triolet (not the north face) and Chardonnet.

From his *Carnet de courses* one suspects he was also doing a bit of unofficial guiding. In 1936 he climbed a series of big Swiss mountains with the Japanese Kimchi by the ordinary routes. True, the regulations in those days were somewhat less strict and in that same year he was formally granted the diploma of assistant guide by the Club Alpin Français. But as a Genevan it was under the aegis of the CAS and the État de Valais that he did his guides' course, the sole lowlander amongst the traditional mountain families of the high Swiss Alps. After a gruelling 17 days under the direction of Alexander Graven and L Thétaz he passed out top.

However, it was not through occasional guiding in the high mountains supplemented by a bit of gardening that he would earn a decent living. That came when the Ecole d'Alpinisme de Genève started up in 1936 and gave him the chance to develop his clientele. Courses were based on the Salève with a final session in the nearby French Alps along with ski courses in winter. Salève, although technically in France, was the great rendez-vous for the remarkable galaxy of Genevan climbers of that epoch and it was there that he got to know Marcel Gallay, who was particularly powerful on rock. Together they did the first winter ascent of the Caiman on 12-13 January 1937, a major undertaking of what was then a remote peak. Since November, they had been planning to make the attempt in February but one day when out training on ski Lambert decided that the conditions were right and they left there and then, without telling anyone. They arrived at Tines at 1pm and flogged up for five hours via the Chapeau, then the standard route to the Requin hut, the base for all climbing in the great cirque of the Vallée Blanche. The major problem next day was the deep powder on the Glacier des Plans, both on the approach and descent and they arrived at the Col Supérieur du Plan totally knackered at 9.30am (See Gallay's account in *La Montagne*, June 1937, pp223-300). On the traverse of the Crocodile, Gallay lost a glove and his hand started freezing until Lambert finally remembered

he had a spare pair. They reached the summit of the Caiman at 3.45pm, Gallay having led the main rock pitch in espadrille, and finally in the dark, after something like 25 hours on the go, got back to the hut, (Lambert gives the time as 21h 10m for the ascent). Given the conditions and the primitive equipment – they stuffed the inside of their boots with paper, greasing the inside of their boots and feet and sprinkling them with mustard powder – the shortness of the winter days, the sudden decision to go, the ascent shows not only Lambert's determination to push the limits, but also a certain insouciance which is not totally to be attributed to his youth. It was after this successful Caiman outing that they decided on a winter ascent of the Diable. And it was round December Lambert announced that Erika Stagni would be coming too.

Mlle Erika Stagni must have been a godsend to Lambert. He probably met her on a course at Salève but the first record of climbing with her in his carnet is the 27 May 1937 when they did the traverse of the Grépon. Up to then Kimchi had been his main client and with the Japanese he had already done the Grand Combin and Mont Blanc that year, but now he totally disappears from the scene. Stagni was a good athlete and a particularly fine horsewoman, but she had recently caught the climbing bug, to the disapproval of mama (Mme Amstutz) who did not appreciate the kind of people who indulged. However, she was very rich in her own right, young and fit. Before his guides' course in June he managed to fit in the Clochetons of Planpraz and the Dru and Mlle Stagni was now Erika.

As soon as he got back they were out regularly training at the Salève and that summer they did the Verte, the *Mayer-Dibona* on the Requin, the *Mummery-Ravanel* traverse, the *Ryan-Lochmatter* on the Plan, the Frontier ridge on Mont Maudit, and then an eight-day campaign on the Aiguilles, with the first descent of the *Allain* on the Caiman, a new route on the Pointe des Nantillons, the traverse of the Grépon, Aiguille de Roc, Mer de Glace face of the Grépon with a final flourish of traversing the Fou, Ciseaux and Blaitière summits, 20 hours roundtrip from Montenvers. And in this campaign they were accompanied by Fernand Gros and André Roch: no mean company. No wonder Lambert considered her capable of accompanying them on the Diable, particularly as it would mean all necessary supplies provided and a big fat fee of a thousand Swiss francs. And to give her proper due, there is no evidence in any account that Erika Stagni was a burden. That she was the only one that came out of the adventure without surgery is not entirely due to the fact that especial care was taken of her.

So the winter saw Erika training hard with Raymond on ski tours during a prolonged period of fine weather but various illnesses and indispositions meant the projected departure date had to be postponed. Indeed, when they did set off Lambert was still suffering from a bad attack of flu which made the ascent to the Requin a misery, although next day he suddenly felt over it. The weather was still brilliant and there was no reason it should not remain so. And even if it did change Lambert was confident he could deal with the situation.



Marcel Gallay.

### The Objective

Two people used the word *gonflé* (foolhardy, hair-brained) to me in describing Lambert's goal. It was reflected in Lambert's overconfidence and culpable irresponsibility in failing to leave any information in Chamonix about where they were going. The result was that neither Stagni's mother nor the Chamonix guides knew where to look and it was only a week later that the Genevans who alone knew where to search arrived on the scene.

The remoteness of the climbers' objective cannot be overstated, particularly in the conditions of  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  in which they were caught. But outside the Chamonix valley there was no communications system and any coordination was through personal contacts. Nor were there weather forecasts. Indeed, the breakthrough in understanding the formation of depressions that caught them unawares was not made until 1940. There was a railway to Monteviers but that was seasonally closed and the standard way in any case to the Requin hut, the sole proper refuge but unguarded in winter, passed (and still did after the war) by Tines and Le Chapeau. Neither the Midi nor Torino lifts had been built. The Diable was certainly in French territory, but it was close to Mussolini's Italy, one of three fascist regimes now surrounding France, which since 1936 had moved to the Left. Any rescue would have to come from the French side.

### The Rescue<sup>1</sup>

The failure of Erika Stagni to give any details concerning what she was up to meant that Mme Amstutz, with no news of her daughter, made no attempt to contact Genevan climbers, even if she knew how to, and instead rang the Hotel des Alpes on the evening of Friday 11 February. The hotel put her on

1. Sources: primarily the R Gréloz account given to the GHM as published in *Alpinisme* June 1938, supplemented by Mollier's information from the guides' records.

to the guides' office. Next morning, they sent Michel Démarchi and Anatole Bozon to the Requin hut. They returned that evening because of the appalling weather, reporting they had found some of the climbers' effects there. On the same day a party of 20 climbers from Geneva, including R Dittert, R Gréloz and F Marullaz left Geneva and spent the night at the Chapeau, where they met the two French guides on their way back down. On the Sunday the Swiss reached the Requin and Loulou Boulaz, Aubert and Dittert immediately carried on and searched the bergschrund of the Col de la Fourche while Gréloz, Marullaz and Marquart explored the rimaye of the Col du Diable on the other side.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime, M and Mme Amstutz instruct the guides to save Stagni at all costs and so at 3pm a first caravan consisting of Michel Payot, Paul Démarchi and Arthur Franchino leave Chamonix, while a second is being organised. But with nothing specific to go on, Mme Amstutz consulted a *radiesthésiste* (diviner, or douser) who advised to look in the Rochefort Mont Mallet area (in fact a not entirely unreasonable suggestion). At about 2pm, the Swiss searchers were forced to give up because of conditions but as they turned the foot of the Capucin in a clearing saw Lambert descending as though he were an *automate* (automaton). He insisted on carrying on down with them, reaching the hut at 6pm. Gréloz and Boulaz continued to the valley to get help and on the way crossed the three Chamonix guides coming to look in the direction Mme Amstutz had instructed, diverting them to the Requin. There, the guides questioned him several times to ensure he was not hallucinating, but he insisted they carry straight on, afraid that having not seeing any rescue the two in the crevasse would make a last desperate attempt to descend. At 11pm, despite a temperature of  $-31^{\circ}\text{C}$  at the hut and probably  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  on the Tacul the three set off, climbing in soft powder where all trace of Lambert's passage had disappeared but managing nevertheless to find the crevasse without too much casting around at first light: 6am. They began taking Stagni down attached to skis and told Gally that another party was on its way up and should arrive at the latest in another two or three hours.

This second caravan, made up of Armand Charlet, Luc Couttet and André Bozon, had left Chamonix about 7pm the previous evening. Joined by some of the Genevans, they immediately carried on from the Requin to the Col du Midi where they met up with the three guides bringing Stagni down. The Chamonix guides with Francis Marullaz and Walter Marquart, friends of Gally, then set off, although the three others reported he was a gonner according to Gally's account. With the tracks of the previous party to follow, the official guides' report says they reached him about 9am. According to Gally they did not arrive until midday and had lost time searching too high and only found him through his yelling. They reached the Col du Midi three hours later where other Genevan friends took over and carried on to the hut. It is only there that the frostbite suffered by the rescuers became clear.

2. Lambert's account differs somewhat, saying it was Loulou Boulaz, Dittert, Aubert, Muller, Gréloz, Bader and Bonnant who see him.

Gréloz's account continues with the frostbite damage. Of the climbers, Stagni lost nothing but Lambert had major amputations while the toes of Gallay, though not yet operated on, were falling off of their own accord. Demarchi had one foot amputated, well behind the toes, while the 'porters' spent four weeks in hospital but finally lost nothing. The Swiss Marullaz lost the end of his toes of one foot.

### Discrepancies

Two intertwined sets of discrepancies in first-hand accounts concerning the days in the crevasse explain how the split between Gallay, Lambert and Stagni finally developed into the bitterness which ended in two court cases. None therefore should be taken at face value, and all versions examined as far as possible with a degree of scepticism.

First, the sleeping bag mystery. According to Gallay (1944), written after he had broken with both Lambert and Stagni (see below), Stagni claimed that on Friday 11 February, their second night in the crevasse, he abandoned his bag against her advice. Gallay rebuts this, stating that Lambert and Stagni had moved with their bags (plural) to the back of the crevasse to be warmer but he had to abandon his own. The lie to that is given by Gallay himself in his original account when he describes how, with the wind blowing in at the entrance and the snow covering their feet and creeping up their legs, he got out of his sleeping bag to push it back and block the entrance with a pair of snowshoes. This more or less concurs with that of 1952 (*La tragédie des Aiguilles du Diable*, Editions Franck Luthi). In both versions he still has a sleeping bag to himself when they arrive in the crevasse.

A further complication to the story comes from Stagni who claims that she tore her sleeping bag in two so as to share it and various pieces of clothing with Gallay. This statement he rightly totally rejects, continuing that when she was rescued she was in a complete sleeping bag of her own and that was how she was taken down. That version was correct (see 'Rescue'). He on the contrary was found sitting on the ice with his legs bare and holding his ungloved hands between his thighs for warmth when finally rescued. So it seems Stagni herself had something to hide. What?

Both Gallay (1940) and Lambert (1946) concur that all three had a sleeping bag at the summit of the Tacul (second bivy). Stagni was installed in a relatively sheltered place and the two men shared a bag in a more exposed location. Gallay (1952) states they were each in their own sleeping bag but next morning his was so frozen it was abandoned: a subtle difference. Although saying nothing specific about sleeping bags, Lambert does note that one of the problems about the bivy at the Tacul was that the sacks were going to get soaked. So the pair of them huddled together in one sack, and in the morning the other was too frozen to move and consequently abandoned. So there were only two sleeping bags when they arrived in the crevasse, one of which was Gallay's, the other shared by Lambert and Stagni. For some reason Gallay does not want to let on that Lambert's bag is big enough for two, albeit uncomfortably and impossible to do up fully when occupied by

two men. But with a man and a young woman? Lambert says nothing about sleeping arrangements in the crevasse.

The next mention of sleeping bags comes from Gallay after Lambert goes for help leaving them on their own. Gallay states Stagni was tucked up in her sleeping bag with gloves on. And in both his versions, he mentions that an unusable sleeping bag was laid out on the bottom of their crevasse (so why was he not at least sitting on that rather than bare ice?). Stagni's claim that she had torn her sack in two to help Gallay might provide an explanation but makes no sense if she and Lambert were in fact sharing a bag, which they were. It does however provide another explanation for why one of the bags was unusable after Lambert set off, leaving his behind for Stagni. Altogether three explanations are possible. Either Gallay shared a bag with Stagni but does not want to admit it, or else Stagni would not let him, or else it was Lambert's bag that had become unusable and abandoned, so Stagni got her own smaller bag, which could not accommodate two, back from Gallay who was forced to spend the night in a frozen anorak. None stands up to examination.



Lambert with his hands heavily bandaged recovering from his ordeal in a Geneva hospital.

### Gallay's Motives

In his 1940 account Galley states that after their abortive outing from the crevasse, it would have been too long and complicated for all to try and descend and neither he nor Lambert wanted to leave Stagni on her own. In reality Gallay was trying to disguise the fact that he was already in a bad physical state when Lambert decided to go for help. His condition belied the story that it was thanks to him that Stagni was safe and sound, and that his serious deterioration was due essentially to the day and a half waiting before the rescue came. In Gallay's 1952 account, he insinuated he was the equal of Lambert by posing it as a dilemma with Lambert deciding it must be him, for he is the guide. Lambert (1946) on the contrary made it clear that after their attempted sortie to Col Maudit, the other two were in no fit state to descend. So after talking things over he decided the only answer is for him to go alone. It must also be recognised (and Stagni admitted this) that at one stage she implored the two others not to abandon her.

Behind all these discrepancies in fact lie their respective depositions for a court case in 1941 (see below). Lambert and Stagni called as evidence the state Gallay was found in. Gallay riposted that it was invalid to judge his condition when Lambert left by the lamentable state that resulted from a further day and a half of waiting in which he, unlike Stagni, had no sleeping bag. To back up his claim he reported a conversation Lambert had with friends on 1 November 1939 in which he acknowledged that Gallay was



Gallay published harrowing pictures of his injuries to garner support for what he saw as the injustice of his situation.

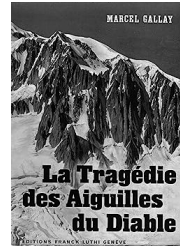
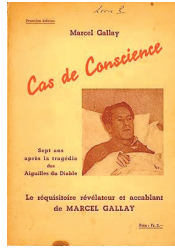
capable of descending and had there just been the two of them they would have gone together. With three it would have been too long and difficult and Stagni could not be left alone. Not too much should be read into this. Even assuming the conversation was reported correctly, it does little more than indicate that Gallay was not totally *hors de combat* on 13 February and as a pair naturally Lambert would have tried going down with him.

In brief, we may conclude that Gallay was playing his role as best he could. The poor man had to try and make a case for why he should have received equal treatment with Lambert and the guides who rescued him, and morally he was arguably right. But legally to do so he needed to exaggerate and make it appear that Mlle Stagni owed her life, or at least her complete recovery, in part to him. His real anger and bitterness are against Lambert and derive from the fact that he did not back up his story, while Stagni had forgotten her promises that her mother would look after them all, stating it was Lambert alone who saved her. It's interesting to note her comment that women were more resilient than men and that anyhow they all took their chances and some came out of it better than others. It is also relevant that when the three of them arrived in the crevasse, Lambert observed that Stagni had no signs of frostbite, whilst the pair of them had serious concerns about their own state.

### **Betrayed: Le Guide Acheté<sup>3</sup>**

Lambert's first visit to Gallay on 1 July 1938 followed Lambert's second

3. Based on Gallay 27 Oct 1944.



The three publications Gally produced to argue his case, two in 1940 alone.

round of amputations. He wanted a *déposition*, essentially an affidavit, since Stagni was refusing to pay. This Gally supplied. A month or so later, Lambert arrived with the Chamonix guides who were in good spirits despite their injuries and only getting 20 French francs per diem for three months from their own insurance system. They were all determined to take a case out against Stagni and wanted him to join them. Gally declined but did not say why, possibly because he was preparing his own account (1940). In any case it was not obvious what Lambert could sue Stagni for except the thousand Swiss francs for his guiding fee, which he sent to her lawyer.

Mme Amstutz profited from this potential divergence of views, stage one of which was to get Stagni to settle with the Chamonix guides on condition they drop their communal case with Lambert. That, Gally claimed, was when Lambert changed tactics and finally reached a settlement amounting to 7,000 Swiss francs all told, provided Lambert supported Stagni's account. When Gally found that she had completely recovered and was back riding and driving fast cars with no care for her rescuer he swore to fight this injustice and threatened a press campaign.

It was carrying out this threat that finally determined Mme Amstutz would do nothing for Gally, although she did eventually offer a settlement of a thousand Swiss francs provided she heard nothing more from him. Gally refused this in September 1938 and decided to publish his 1940 account to clarify the situation with a view to starting legal action. In the preface he thanks all the guides and friends who risked their lives, at least those who had not '*marchandé*' (traded) their devotion. He finishes:

*What I have never been able to understand is the bad luck whereby from the time of the first rescue I was separated from my companions of the route, and always kept away, with no help, nor comfort even from [Mlle Stagni] who came out of this adventure intact.*

As a result of the potential court case Lambert and Stagni gave *dépositions* in 1941 which more or less scuppered Gallay. So he took on the lawyer who originally acted on behalf of Lambert and the guides. Yet the lawyer warns him that what he was going to argue then was quite different from what he would say now.

However, Gallay's plight seems to have stirred a certain amount of sympathy and various people try to get influential institutions to intervene, including the Valais guides association who asked CAS to act, since the whole matter was reflecting badly on the spirit of solidarity amongst mountaineers. The result was, according to Gallay, that Lambert wrote him a menacing letter, which he said he couldn't find, but which ended to the effect that he had made his own ball and chain and that he should make sure that he didn't get crushed by it.

Nevertheless, the fact that Lambert may have given a different slant to his account when trying to get compensation does not mean that he perjured himself. It can suffice to change the emphasis of events to put matters in a different light. The key to Gallay's case was, first, that he was capable of going down with Lambert but that Stagni could not be left on her own and, second, that it was thanks to his devotion, keeping the snow hole blocked and the physical rubbing he provided that Stagni survived with no long-term injuries. Indeed, he argued that it was his legal duty for one of them to stay, citing an interesting case of 1933 in which a young man left his female companion when they got lost in order to get rescue and she died, her body only being found when the snows started melting. The judges considered his behaviour was responsible for her death and condemned him to two years' imprisonment. One would need to look more carefully at that particular case to see whether it really was relevant but in any event, it was an *ex post facto* discovery by his lawyer to justify why Gallay stayed.

The essence of the argument Gallay had to make, if he were to stand a legal chance of getting compensation and damages, was essentially the first issue: the succour he gave is largely secondary since there was not much else either could do but try and mutually boost morale and give such physical aid as was possible. Leaving aside that it was the guide who was the strongest member of the party and that it was his duty to do everything possible to get rescue for his client, however slim the chances, the question that needs to be answered is: was Gallay in a fit enough state to have gone down when he left? That is where Lambert's testimony would be vital. Clearly, his failure to support Gallay against Stagni's assertions was what kyboshed Gallay's case and caused the rift between the two men.

### **Mme Amstutz**

At this point, we need to examine rather more closely the role of Mme Amstutz. It is easy to dismiss her as an unsympathetic rich bitch, as I originally did, but rich or not, the fact is that the rescue of her daughter, her only concern, was costing her a fortune, and liability becoming open ended. In addition to the Chamonix guides already mentioned, Christian Mollier

sent me the names of eight further guides who went up to the Col du Midi to help evacuate the injured and another five who left at 7am on 15 February and brought the last injured back to the Requin, plus two others who helped in the final stages of the evacuation down to the valley: a total of 23, all at Mme Amstutz's expense. Then there was Dr Ody, who was clearly an able skier, at least to judge by his displacements, and certainly not cheap, and of course the *sorcière*. Now she was having to pick up the bill for treatment of the injured guides she'd hired at the private Clinique de la Colline.

Not surprisingly, she determined to rein back. Why should she pay for Gallay or even Lambert, and indeed guides who were rescuing them as well as her daughter? Well, part of the answer is that without Lambert she would not have been saved. And then there is the admitted fact her daughter pleaded not to be left alone and promised her companions that her mother would look after them.

### The Court Case

So the case swung on whether Gallay contributed to saving Stagni. That is why her mother Mme Amstutz, despite still holding the purse strings for her daughter, allowed Stagni, who was not yet in her majority, to take over negotiations. She and Lambert came to the conclusion that Gallay was in no fit state to descend. That essentially was why Gallay lost his case. As reported in *La Suisse* on 3 April 1947:

*La Cour correctionnelle de Genève has just condemned Marcel Gallay, one of the members of the terrible adventure of the Aiguilles du Diable (February 1938), from which he came out seriously mutilated. Mlle Stagni, having been accused in the course of the trial, considers it necessary to make clear the following: She rejects having been saved by M Gallay. The credit for the rescue, according to her, was entirely due to the guide R Lambert.*

Having done her mother's bidding, Stagni was now free to cut the apron as well as the purse strings and shack up with her new partner Robert Wohlschlag, nicknamed 'Pellebrosse', or dustpan and brush, on account of his thick red hair. It was hardly the improvement socially that mama would have liked, even though she did end up marrying him. Together, they opened some remarkable new routes, notably on the limestone cliffs of the Arve valley between Geneva and Le Fayet. From then on it was pure rock climbing and she did not again venture into the icy wastes of the Mont Blanc massif.

### The Libel Case

The case for libel brought against Gallay in 1963 seems to have had its origins in something Lambert did or said in 1958. As we have seen, Gallay lost his initial case in 1947 when Erika Stagni made it clear that it was Lambert who had rescued her. That was literally true but it was harsh on Gallay. Thereafter, Gallay's attitude, as he told the court in 1963, was to ignore Lambert and

that perhaps explains why in his 1952 book he gave no details of the aftermath. Gallay had been condemned over Stagni and her mother and he was not intending to start a war with Lambert. Lambert in turn had not responded to various things Gallay had been saying and writing, notably his 1944 pamphlet and so matters appeared to have settled. The only explanation we have of why they flared up again is the circular Gallay wrote in 1963 stating that his aim was to seek public acknowledgement for 'the moral wrongs' Lambert had caused him 'since 1958'. What was the significance of the year 1958? Was it Lambert's recovery and fame on Everest, his assured job as a mountain pilot thanks to the help given him by his rich new wife? Was it the contrast with Gallay's own sufferings, broken marriage and indebtedness that made him turn his resentment against the man whom he considered had not sufficiently supported him?

Whatever the motive, Gallay started writing again about their dispute. And what led to the dam bursting was the fact that at the end of 1962 Gallay's leg had finally to be amputated.

*After twenty-five years of fighting and hardships, I have just been amputated for Christmas and this new drama obliges me to reconsider the deplorable attitude you have taken towards me ... For once recognize your cowardice ... I have enough material available to enlighten public opinion concerning the man who was once said to be the highest in the world but who will remain for me the lowest.*

This letter of itself clearly indicates Gallay's intentions of dragging Lambert's name through the mud. Yet once more Lambert had not allowed himself to be provoked. Finally, Gallay decided the only relief he could find for the anguish caused by his amputation was to blacken Lambert's name publicly by circulating a letter to some 500 people, mostly CAS members, in which he stated:

*... this approach will be the culminating point for the injustice imposed on me by my former climbing partners. The aim is not to acquire financial reparation, but solely to obtain from the principal person responsible, the guide Raymond Lambert, public recognition of the moral wrongs he has caused me since 1958.*

That, Lambert could not ignore and in May 1963 he opened proceedings, suing for 4,000 Swiss francs in damages and a thousand for expenses to meet the cost of contacting the recipients of the letters. The court finally adjudged on 24 September 1964 opining that Gallay had indeed libelled him out of a spirit of resentment and vengeance and that his intention had indeed been to harm his reputation. Lambert was not responsible for the amputation and in no way did it justify changing Gallay's earlier decision to ignore him. In pleading before the court, Gallay had made no attempt to withdraw what he had said or express regret, while recognising he had made errors.

However, there were mitigating circumstances. It was understandable that in his depressed state Gallay might consider that his former fellow climber should have given him greater support even if Gallay had produced no evidence to show in what ways Lambert had fallen short. In any case, they would not justify his explicit intention to damage Lambert's reputation. But the stress permitted a considerable reduction in the damages asked for, since the harm done Lambert was essentially one to his honour and reputation and not financial. The court awarded damages of a thousand francs and another 500 for costs in circulating the judgement to the recipients of the 500 letters whose names Gallay was ordered to produce. He was also ordered to pay court costs, amounting to almost another thousand.



John Wilkinson on the summit of L'Isolée in 1965. (John Wilkinson)

### Envoi

Thus ended the tragedy of the first winter ascent of the Aiguilles du Diable. They were well named, those needles of granite, and so too the Combe Maudit, the accursed valley, above which they rose. None of the three that had set off so confidently that February of 1938 came out of their adventure with their reputation unscathed. For a quarter of a century the bitterness engendered was to pursue them. Both Stagni and Lambert were cleared through legal proceedings paid for ironically by Gallay whose life had been permanently ruined. Did that absolve them? Did their remarkable subsequent climbing careers dispense them from moral responsibility for their companion's misfortunes? Ironic that Stagni's remarkable ascent of the *Brandler-Hasse* occurred a few weeks after Gallay lost his libel case and is heard of no more. Did she and Lambert brush Gallay's misfortunes aside?

The reader will have their own opinions. All I have tried to do is present the facts concerning the aftermath, in so far I have been able to establish them to supplement Eric Vola's account of those bitter winter days.