THE

IDEALIST

THE STORY OF BARON PIERRE DE COUBERTIN

A HISTORICAL NOVEL OF LOVE, WAR, TRAGEDY, TRIUMPH, AND THE FRENCH VISIONARY WHO FOUNDED THE MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES

GEORGE HIRTHLER

The

IDEALIST

A HISTORICAL NOVEL

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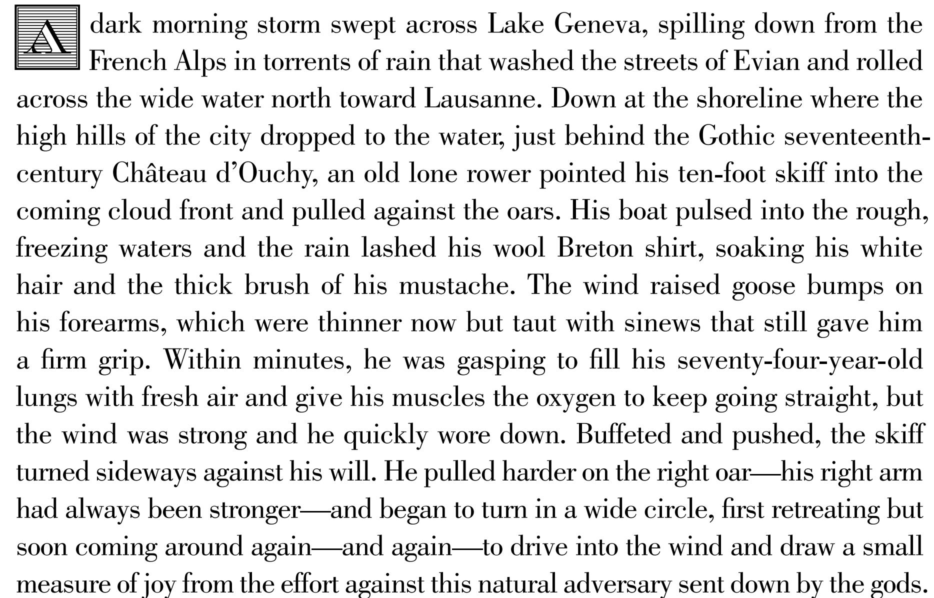
PRELUDE

THE STORM

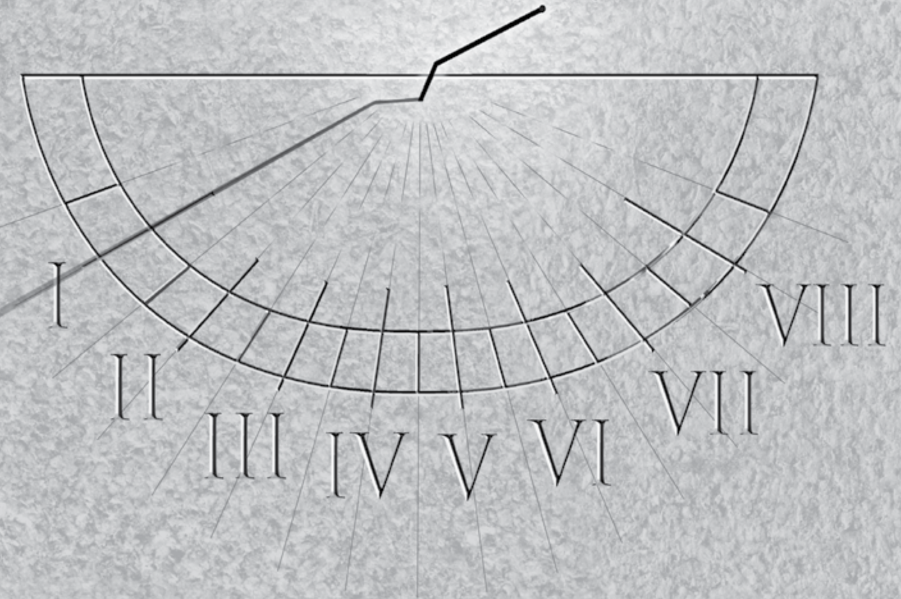
Lausanne, Switzerland, 1937

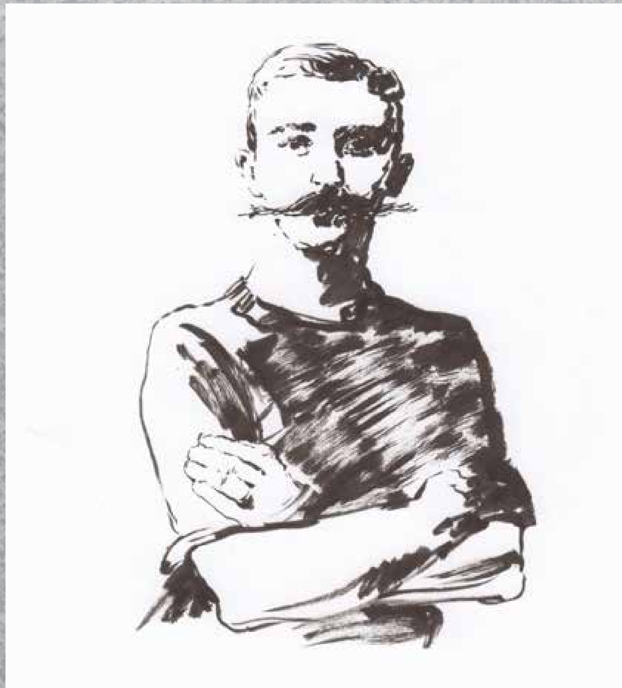


A dark morning storm swept across Lake Geneva, spilling down from the French Alps in torrents of rain that washed the streets of Evian and rolled across the wide water north toward Lausanne. Down at the shoreline where the high hills of the city dropped to the water, just behind the Gothic seventeenth-century Château d'Ouchy, an old lone rower pointed his ten-foot skiff into the coming cloud front and pulled against the oars. His boat pulsed into the rough, freezing waters and the rain lashed his wool Breton shirt, soaking his white hair and the thick brush of his mustache. The wind raised goose bumps on his forearms, which were thinner now but taut with sinews that still gave him a firm grip. Within minutes, he was gasping to fill his seventy-four-year-old lungs with fresh air and give his muscles the oxygen to keep going straight, but the wind was strong and he quickly wore down. Buffeted and pushed, the skiff turned sideways against his will. He pulled harder on the right oar—his right arm had always been stronger—and began to turn in a wide circle, first retreating but soon coming around again—and again—to drive into the wind and draw a small measure of joy from the effort against this natural adversary sent down by the gods.

He would not be denied his morning workout, so he persisted, turning circles for a half hour before heading back to shore as the storm weakened. Dragging his skiff onto the rocky bank, he looked south toward France, his beloved mother country, and warmed briefly as a ray of sunlight cut through an opening in the clouds. For a fleeting moment, he imagined he saw the signature summit of the highest peak, Mount Blanc.

HOPES AND FEARS





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THE LETTER

On a cold January day in Paris, Jacques St. Clair, the leading sports writer for *Le Petit Journal,* was contemplating the image of the Matterhorn, searching for the right way to end his story of the baker from the Latin Quarter who had climbed Switzerland's highest and most dramatic alpine peak a year ago in a daring solo ascent—"just to see what the world looked like from up there."

Leaning back in his slatted wooden chair, feet up on the desk, ignoring the cacophony of the newsroom, St. Clair fingered the silver chain around his neck, twirling and catching again and again the gold pendant of a single bicycle wheel. He pondered the motivation of a bread maker who spent his days kneading dough for his neighbors while dreaming of risking his life for vistas only visible from the top of the world.

"For you, Monsieur Jacques," said the mail boy, interrupting the writer's reverie and dropping a letter on the stack of papers next to his old Olivetti typewriter. Without breaking his relaxed pose, St. Clair reached over and picked up the letter. It was postmarked Lausanne, not that far from the valley of Zermatt where the baker had started his ascent. Resisting the distraction, St. Clair dropped the letter and went back to his pendant, looking for the next literary handhold to lead him to the end of this particular story.

He was thirty-six at the time and had gained some prestige for the quality of the stories he wrote, particularly the profiles of sports champions, active and retired, and those, like his baker, who stepped out of the everyday to pursue

the heroic. He loved the milieu of sport—its sweat, its risks, its obstacles, its triumphs, the adulation it engendered. It was in his blood. A decade and a half earlier, he had been a promising competitive cyclist, winning two stages of the Tour de France at the peak of his athletic career in 1923.

And St. Clair still took pride in his physique, which was stockier and more muscled now, but fairly fit. His old editor, Edgar, said it was obviously the power of his body that gave his writing its vigor. He was five foot ten with a large chest that extended like a shelf from his round and solid shoulders. Somewhere in his French bloodlines there must have been a German or a Scandinavian—his hair was blond and thick and rose from his head like the bristles of a stiff brush. He combed it forward in an unfashionable but distinct style. His eyes were hazel, and his jaw provided a strong frame for his handsome visage.

He'd likely still be an athlete if it weren't for the diary he had kept on the Tour that year. Spotted by a journalist, it was the diary, when it was published, that had opened the door into writing. Without much hesitation, St. Clair had parked his bike and moved from the peloton to the middle of a throng of editors, reporters, typists, and copyboys in the equally hectic and crowded newsroom of *Le Journal* on rue de la Fayette. The diary offered painful descriptions of the agony of the mountain stages, especially St. Clair's collapse on the Col d'Izoard, where the champion, Henri Pélissier, who rode for Automoto, seized the lead in an act of sheer dominance. The writing revealed a literary talent for long-form features that quickly lifted St. Clair above the competitive hustle and fray of daily deadlines.

He gained popularity and prominence in writing about Johnny Weissmuller and Duke Kahanamoku, the American gold and silver medalists in swimming at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games. Rising quickly, he became *Le Journal's* lead Olympic writer, which led to significant assignments at the Games in Amsterdam in 1928, Los Angeles in 1932, and Berlin in 1936. In the German capital, he was mesmerized by the brilliance of Jesse Owens and aggravated by the symbolic clash of the Olympic rings and the Nazi swastika.

As his career developed and his talent regularly took him to the front rows of sports history, St. Clair felt a growing desire to write something of more significance. He wanted to find a literary challenge that would take him beyond the confines of the celebrity profile and give him a chance to test himself in the realm of a book, a literary marathon he thought of as the *Tour de Page*. He longed for a journey through a story of chapters that unfolded like a staged race, one after the other, with the same unpredictability that sport presented.

It was this ambition, the desire to see his name on the cover of a book that the letter from Lausanne surprisingly spoke to. The moment after he sliced

it open, St. Clair knew this was the opportunity he had been hoping for—a chance to break away from the pack and ride off toward the mountains alone, to find his own path to a dramatic solo summit. The envelope contained six pages, all filled with the neat scrolling script of a Dr. Francis M. Messerli, who had, according to the date, started the letter a week before on New Year's Day, 1937. As he read, St. Clair felt his muscles tense in anticipation. Line by line an old familiar feeling took hold of his body—as if a clock were counting down to the start of a race.

Dear Monsieur St. Clair:
Although I seldom see your work on the day it is published, I have been an avid long-distance reader of your stories for more than a decade here in Lausanne. We have Le Petit Journal *sent in each week in part because I have developed a particular affection for your literary portraits, which often touch me like paintings do.*

But it is your reporting on the Olympic Games, which I consider the finest published anywhere, that has moved me to write to you now. I believe we are near the end of one of the greatest stories in the history of modern sport, the story of a life of epic struggles and heroic determination that has been largely overlooked by the world, even though it produced the greatest spectacle of sport we know—the Olympic Games.

It is, of course, the story of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a Frenchman from Paris like you, a man whose singular idealism and visionary force brought the Olympics back to life after 1,500 years and helped move sport onto the field of national passion where it thrives today.

For twenty-nine years, I have been one of Coubertin's closest friends and allies—and I have also been his doctor. Across that period, I have watched his fortunes decline while those of the Games have risen higher and higher. And in the last year, after the controversial success of the Berlin Games, I have seen another change—and I'm afraid if we don't record his memories for posterity soon, they will be lost to us forever.

I have asked the baron again and again, even begging once or twice, to write his full autobiography. Despite his promises and his undeniably prolific capacity to write about anything, he has not filled a single page of prose toward this goal. A few brief anecdotal memoirs he drafted some time

ago for the International Olympic Committee, which he founded, hardly tell the full story.

So this letter is dispatched with a certain sense of urgency. I have set aside funds for a writer in residence to get the baron's story written. I'm hoping you are that writer. Please let me know if you are interested; if so, we will make arrangements to move you to Lausanne to begin the work as soon as you are available.

The letter went on to convey more detail, but that, in essence, was the offer Jacques St. Clair was left to consider—an offer to move to Lausanne to work for a year at full salary on a book about the Frenchman who had reached back through time to resurrect the ancient Olympic Games for the modern world.

St. Clair knew who Coubertin was. He had first seen the little man at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, he remembered. But it wasn't actually at the Games, he thought. No, it was during a ceremony at the Court of Honor at the Sorbonne, a moment commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Olympic Movement. The date was June 23rd. He recalled the image of Coubertin walking into the arched, columned court in a long-tailed tuxedo, a top hat in his hand, side by side with the president of the Republic of France, Monsieur Gaston Doumergue.

St. Clair leaned back in his hard chair for a moment, picking up the Automoto squeeze ball he kept in the pile of papers and books stacked around the Olivetti. He squeezed without counting—one hundred squeezes a day was a long-lost goal—and let his thoughts drift back to that day.

St. Clair had been at the ceremony to meet and interview Charles Paddock, the American sprinter from Texas glorified as "the human cannonball." Paddock had won the 100 meters at the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games after the war and had set the world record at 10.2 seconds a year later. St. Clair remembered Paddock had been there to see Coubertin—to thank him for helping promote a world sprinters' tour.

St. Clair had waited for Paddock while the event unfolded, paying little attention to the dignitaries and their speeches. At the time, that side of the Games—the organizational effort, the committees of old men, the history and archives—held no interest for him, even though he loved history, particularly the history of Paris. But now this story—the story of this small, aristocratic Frenchman pushing forward an enormous event of modern pageantry, an idea that was embraced by the world's greatest athletes and heads of state—this story of how the Games actually began and became the foreboding spectacle the

Nazis had turned them into the year before—this could be fascinating.

He breathed deeply and squeezed the ball hard, holding his excitement at bay as he recognized that Coubertin's story would take him out of the arena he had been working in—into a broader game of politics, finance, and some international intrigue, he was sure—while allowing him to maintain the connection to the heroes of sport who had fueled his work until now.

Messerli had been persuasive in appealing to his desire to write something significant. "This story cannot be contained in the margins of a newspaper profile or told with justice in the pages of a magazine," Messerli had written. "It needs a writer whose heart pulses with sport and whose talents and ambitions are equal to the tasks of rendering the imprint of one of the most important lives of our times."

Messerli had left a telephone number and indicated that once he and St. Clair struck an agreement, he would secure an apartment for the year and send a package of books and documents for background.

It was the middle of the afternoon and St. Clair's story of the Matterhorn baker was due in the morning, but he had only the conclusion left and it could wait till late tonight or the first thing tomorrow.

He had to share the Lausanne letter with his American fiancée right now. He lifted the gold wheel to his lips and kissed it before letting it fall back under his shirt. Juliette had given it to him one month ago to mark the anniversary of their third year together. She had called it a good luck charm, and he would tell her it had been spinning in his hand when the letter arrived. She would not believe their good fortune. They'd been talking about traveling and thinking about moving for months, their hearts set on a new adventure. Donning his heavy jacket and tucking the letter inside, he folded his tablets and papers into a canvas satchel, pulled on his cycling gloves, and headed for the street below where his new De Dion-Bouton Course with the three-speed *dérailleur* was locked inside the building's entrance.