TAUGWALDER AND THE MATTERHORN

By ARNOLD LUNN

(1)

THE eightieth anniversary of Whymper's ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 was made the occasion of a special Whymper week at Zermatt. As the only English member of the Alpine Club present at the banquet, I made a short speech, and at the end of the evening Otto Furrer came up to me and said : ' You at least have written and said things in favour of old Taugwalder ' : a remark indicative of the contrast between the prevailing atmosphere of official panegyric and the undercurrent of private criticism. Whymper, as Knubel remarked to me, was ' nicht beliebt ' in the Zermatt valley, mainly, I suspect, because of his attitude to guides in general and to old Taugwalder in particular. His attack on the Taugwalders still rankles, and for this reason Herr Egger's vindication of Taugwalder in his recent work, *Pioniere der Alpen* (Amstutz, Herdeg & Co., Zürich) is very timely.

Herr Egger is a distinguished mountaineer, a pioneer of skiing and of ski mountaineering—he made the first ski ascent of Caucasian Elbruz—and one of the few real historians that the sport of skiing has produced. It is interesting to compare *Pioneers of the Alps*, a study of Swiss guides seen through English eyes, with the far greater realism of *Pioniere der Alpen*, in which Swiss guides are described by a Swiss.

' It is our duty,' writes Carl Egger, ' to vindicate Taugwalder's good name against a gentleman whose public treatment of him was so bad that it is unique in the whole history of the guiding profession.' And since the attack on this great Swiss guide was made by an Englishman it is right that an Englishman should publicly associate himself with Carl Egger's vindication. Belated justice is at least to be preferred to continued acquiescence in injustice.

Taugwalder was, by common consent, one of the leading guides of his generation. He is first heard of as the leader of the famous Schlagintweit expedition of 1851 when the E. peak of Monte Rosa was climbed for the second time. He led the first determined attack on the Dent Blanche and on the Lyskamm, and in both cases he came within measurable distance of success. He made the first ascents of Pollux, the Untergabelhorn and Wellenkuppe. Above all, he was one of the first guides to believe that the Matterhorn could be climbed. He was, for years, one of the few guides who were not mesmerised by the mountain's apparent inaccessibility. He was prepared not only to attack the mountain in summer but also to lead Kennedy on his attempt on the mountain in winter. While men like Almer and Carrel were exploring every route to the summit but the one which was ultimately climbed, old Taugwalder on his own initiative made a solitary exploration of the S.E. face and pronounced that it was climbable. Taug-

walder's presence on the first ascent of the peak was not due to chance. He was fully qualified to take part in that expedition, and few men have received less credit for a historic triumph.

(2)

The responsibility of leadership of the expedition which conquered the Matterhorn was divided between Whymper and Hudson. 'We deliberated together whenever there was occasion, and our authority was recognised by the others. Whatever responsibility there was devolved upon us,' wrote Whymper.

It was on Lord Francis Douglas' recommendation that Whymper sought out and engaged old Peter Taugwalder, who had led Douglas up the Obergabelhorn. Whymper, therefore, had a greater responsibility for Taugwalder than Hudson, and consequently for Taugwalder's arrangement of the ropes, and this responsibility was the greater on the descent, because Whymper was above Taugwalder, and Hudson below when the rope broke. Whymper was a born leader who never delegated authority to his guides; perhaps, if he had been readier to do so, his partnership with Carrel would have been more successful, and the Matterhorn might have been climbed two years earlier.

He regarded his guides, as Mr. Smythe tells us, not as partners in a joint enterprise, but as employees, and he insisted on unquestioning obedience to all orders, an attitude which led to serious trouble when the guides were men of forceful independence such as Klucker or the Carrels. 'Whymper,' writes Mr. Smythe, 'was a hard taskmaster to himself and his guides, and the gulf between them was absolute.'

(3)

Whymper made three charges against Taugwalder:

(i) 'All those who had fallen had been tied with the Manilla, or with the second and equally strong rope, and consequently there had been only one link—that between old Peter and Lord Francis Douglas—where the weaker rope had been used. This had a very ugly look for Taugwalder, for it was not possible to suppose that the others would have sanctioned the employment of a rope so greatly inferior in strength when there were more than two hundred and fifty feet of the better qualities still remaining out of use. I was one hundred feet or more from the others whilst they were being tied up, and am unable to throw any light on the matter. Croz and old Peter no doubt tied up the others.'

The prime responsibility, however, for sanctioning or not sanctioning the use of this rope was Whymper's.

There is only one incident in Taugwalder's career which may be cited in support of the suggestion that he deliberately used a weaker rope, the story told to me by Mr. John Stogdon. I do not think that there is any reason today for suppressing his name, and the following is an extract of a letter which he wrote to me:

'I had a good many expeditions with old Peter Taugwalder, including Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa; and I had rather a tender spot for the somewhat coarse, dirty old beggar. I should not like my name to appear to help the balance to

incline in the direction of his guilt in that Matterhorn affair. It was not on the Dent Blanche that he took the rope off; it was coming down a long steep slope of bare rock from the top of the Tête Blanche towards Prarayé. I had a couple of men with me who were inexperienced; and I fancy he must have thought that, if one of them let go, which was unlikely, he would be able to choose whether to hold on or let go. I happened to look up and see what was going on, and I made him tie up at once.'

In justice to Taugwalder it must be remembered that the doctrine of 'collective security' which we take for granted today was not universally accepted even by good guides in the sixties. Simon, Hardy's guide on the Finsteraarhorn, refused to rope for the ascent of the final ridge on the ground that anybody who slipped would drag down the rest. 'Non, Monsieur! ici chacun pour lui-même.'

Mr. W. Longman in the first volume of the ALPINE JOURNAL protested against a common practice at the time. Guides were in the habit of tying the rope round the amateur, and themselves merely holding in their hand the coil of rope at the end. Mr. Longman cites two fatal accidents in which guides had failed to check a fall on the part of their employers because they themselves were not tied on to the rope.

Otto Furrer tells me that even the great Alexander Burgener sometimes tied the rope not round his body but round his belt, and that even today in Zermatt a standard joke is to describe a bad climber as the sort of climber to tempt one to use the 'Burgener knot.'

We must not apply the standards of today to the past, and all that Mr. Stogdon's story proves is that Taugwalder adopted a practice which was fairly common at the time.

The real explanation of the weak rope lies probably in the intoxication of victory. Many an accident in the Alps has been caused by relaxed attention after a hard won triumph. Nothing could have been more casual than the arrangement of the party on the descent.

Whymper stayed behind to write the names of the party in a bottle, tied himself on to young Peter, ran down after the others, and eventually tied on to old Peter Taugwalder. The bad rope between Taugwalder and Douglas was merely one aspect of a casual and badly planned descent.

'I am convinced,' writes Carl Egger,

'that Whymper attempted to conceal his responsibility by focussing public attention exclusively on Taugwalder, who, in point of fact, made with Hudson all the arrangements for this expedition. Who was the owner of the rope and alone knew its characteristics? Who tied himself on to Taugwalder, and must therefore have immediately noticed that he was using a weak rope, the remainder of which was clearly visible on his shoulders? Who raised no objection to this? Whymper, the "conqueror" of the Matterhorn.'

(ii) Whymper reports an alleged conversation on the descent between the two Taugwalders.

'They spoke in patois, which I did not understand. At length the son said in French, "Monsieur." "Yes." "We are poor men; we have lost our Herr; we shall not get paid; we can ill afford this." "Stop!" I said, interrupting him, "that is nonsense. I shall pay you, of course, just as if your Herr were here." They talked together in their patois for a short time, and then the son spoke again. "We don't wish you to pay us. We wish you to

write in the hotel book at Zermatt, and to your journals, that we have not been paid." "What nonsense are you talking? I don't understand you. What do you mean?" He proceeded—"Why, next year there will be many travellers at Zermatt, and we shall get more *voyageurs*." '

The Taugwalders spoke no English, and Whymper no German. It is highly probable that the Taugwalders' French was very sketchy, and it was all but certain that Whymper was far from fluent in the language. 'In the best French that I could muster,' wrote Whymper in his 1860 journal, 'I asked if I had the honour of speaking to Monsieur le Curé Imseng of Saas.' There is no evidence that Whymper learnt French between 1860 and 1865, and a man whose best French was only adequate for the simplest of questions, would not be capable of understanding a complicated proposition such as that which the Taugwalders are alleged to have made in their indifferent French.

The Taugwalders were, of course, concerned for their professional reputation, and anxious that they should be cleared of any suspicion of responsibility for the accident. It is indeed quite probable that they asked Whymper to write something to this effect in the hotel book, and that the conversation as reported by Whymper was based on a complete misunderstanding.

(iii) In the memorandum of a communication made to John Jermyn Cowell, Honorary Secretary of the Alpine Club in 1863–4, and John W. Cowell by Whymper it is stated that after the accident the Taugwalders

'displayed the most abject cowardice, entire want of resource—utter and helpless bewilderment—that after he (Whymper) had succeeded in rallying them, and enabled them to reach a place of comparative safety, the young one broke out into frightful levity, displaying the most brutal insensibility—eating—drinking — smoking — laughing — vociferating . . . that their demeanour gradually became, and continued to be, suggestive of personal danger to himself—that at night they, as it were, hustled him to induce him to attempt the further descent by moonlight—that thereafter they urged him to lie down in a manner so importunate and minatory as to induce him to place himself with his back to a rock and with his axe in his hand to order them to keep at a greater distance from him—and that he passed the night standing in that manner and prepared to defend himself. The inferences which arose in our minds from what E. Whymper described were that the Taugwalders saw that the additional loss of Whymper would afford them an opening to a future notoriety of a very lucrative nature, and that they were prepared to avail themselves of any opportunity that might offer during the descent of bringing about that loss—and Edward Whymper did not deny to us that similar inferences suggested themselves to him during the whole of that dreadful night.'

Mr. Smythe has done a disservice to Whymper's memory by publishing this document, but a real service to truth and to justice. The fact that Whymper could, in all seriousness, make this charge against the Taugwalders wholly discredits him as a witness against them.

(4)

'No one,' writes Mr. Smythe, 'could justly impugn Whymper's veracity in the matter of his conversation with the Taugwalders.'

I suggest that Whymper's charges were based on misunderstanding and on a complete lack of imaginative insight; but none the less, it is

rash of Mr. Smythe to demand an uncritical acceptance of any statement made by Edward Whymper. Mr. Smythe draws attention to a contradiction between two accounts of a remark alleged to have been made by Croz, and also contrasts the bald statement in Whymper's diary that the crevasses at the side of the Gorner Glacier ' rendered getting on it a work of time to a novice,' with the highly coloured account given of the same incident in *Scrambles* :

' If the jump should be successful—well ; if not, I fell into that horrible chasm, to be frozen in, or drowned in that gurgling, rushing water. Everything depended on that jump. Again I asked myself, " Can it be done ? " '

Whymper was above all things a showman who depended upon his pen and his lectures for his living, and he was not the first or the last mountaineer to embroider ' the mere it was.' Compare Whymper's account of what Carrel said on returning to Breuil : ' It is true. We saw them ourselves—they hurled stones at us ! The old traditions *are* true—there are spirits on the top of the Matterhorn,' with the sober version of what the Carrels actually said in the letter which Giordano wrote immediately after their return. Carrel in point of fact recognised Whymper by his white trousers.

Mr. Smythe quotes the following passage from Whymper's letter to *The Times* of August 8, 1865 :

' The only remark which I heard suggestive of danger was made by Croz, but it was quite casual, and probably meant nothing. He said, after I had remarked that we had come up very slowly, " Yes : I would rather go down with you and another guide alone than with those who are going." '

Forty-one years later, in 1906, Whymper repeated this story in *The Strand Magazine* ; but whereas in the first conversation the remark was alleged to have been made on the summit, in the second conversation it was made on the ascent and ' go down with you ' becomes ' go up here with you.' The latter version also appears in a memorandum from Whymper to Tairraz of Chamonix dated March 9, 1911. It was, as Mr. Smythe writes, ' a curious remark for Croz to make in view of the fact that he was employed not by Whymper but by Hudson, with whom he had been climbing on the range of Mont Blanc, and in Hudson he would have been quick to discern a mountaineer as skilful and strong as Whymper.' That the remark pleased Whymper, if indeed it was ever made, is clear, for he repeated it no less than four times ; but he omitted it from his account in *Scrambles*.

Forty-six years after giving publicity to Croz' remark, five years after publishing the remark in *The Strand*, and two months after repeating it in a memorandum, Whymper takes great credit to himself for his delicacy in suppressing Croz' statement. In a letter to Sir Edward Davidson on May 20, 1911, he writes :

' You cannot have heard this. I have intentionally kept it back, thinking it might be distressing to relatives of some of those who were lost on the Matterhorn. I think it may be referred to now. Upon the first ascent, when we were 300 to 400 ft. below the summit, Croz and I detached ourselves from the others and went ahead. After going a few yards Croz, turned to me and said, " Monsieur Whymper, I would rather go up here with you and another guide than with those who are following." He anticipated disaster.'

(5)

It is not only Taugwalder's reputation which is at stake in this controversy, but—to a much lesser degree—Whymper's : a fact which has been consistently evaded in English Alpine literature.

So far as I know, only two English writers have anticipated Carl Egger's criticism of Whymper, Leslie Stephen in 1871, and the present writer in a book published in 1943.

Whymper has been protected from criticism by the *pietas* of the Alpine Club ; but the mother club of mountaineering is the trustee not only of the reputation of her members, but also of the guides who served them ; and it should surely be possible to do justice to the magnitude of Whymper's achievement and to the magic of his immortal book without condoning gross injustice to a guide. Even Captain Farrar in his masterly analysis of the accident acquits Taugwalder, but does not draw the logical conclusion that such complete acquittal necessarily involves some censure on Whymper.

> 'Taugwalder cannot properly be blamed for the use of this rope. Mr. Whymper, with the candour running throughout his book, is perfectly fair to him. The intention to use this rope only as a "spare" rope had not been explained to him. The ropes were not his, or he might well be blamed for the practice, still very prevalent among guides and amateurs alike, which, not long ago, cost the life of a very brilliant mountaineer, Louis Theytaz, of paying scant attention to the age or strength of the tackle.'

Mr. Smythe in his invaluable biography oscillates between *pietas* and discerning criticism. His loyalty to Whymper biases him against the Taugwalders. He hedges on the first two charges, though he acquits the Taugwalders of conspiracy to murder. Uncritical *pietas*, in fact, leads him to the following conclusion : 'It was Whymper's concern before anything else to clear the old man's character, a concern which speaks well for his generosity of spirit.' And this, despite what Whymper himself wrote.

Fortunately for our credit there was one great contemporary of Whympers who realised that attacks such as Whymper's should not be made without tangible evidence, and that it was impossible to acquit Taugwalder without condemning Whymper.

Leslie Stephen's review of *Scrambles* in *Macmillan's Magazine* (August 1871), is far more interesting than his review in the ALPINE JOURNAL, and deserves to be reprinted as a historic document. 'Alpine literature,' he writes,

> 'it is probable, has rather palled upon the world at large. Whatever merits were possessed by the records of climbing, considered simply as a sport, were not of a kind to be very enduring ; and Mr. Whymper's book may perhaps come a little too late for the popular interest in the subject . . . it is not without melancholy that I feel myself to be parting from what must be one of the last, as it is certainly one of the most beautifully illustrated, of the literary family to which it belongs.'

Leslie Stephen adds this comment :

> Mr. Whymper very properly denounces the absurd fable that the elder Taugwalder cut the rope. It was simple impossibility for him to do so ; and if the rope had not instantaneously snapped the whole party must have been

killed. In fact, the three survivors probably owe their lives to Taugwalder's presence of mind, to which Whymper does justice. But I rather regret he should not reject decidedly another grave, though less serious accusation, which comes in fact to this, that Taugwalder intentionally used a weak rope in fastening himself to Lord F. Douglas. Knowing the carelessness too often displayed on such occasions, the confidence which guides will show in weak ropes, and the probable state of excitement of the whole party, which would easily account for such oversight, I think that the hypothesis of deliberate intention on Taugwalder's part is in the highest degree improbable; and there is not a particle of direct evidence in its favour. The presumption would be that Croz was equally responsible; and at any rate such accusations should have some more tangible ground than a vague possibility. . . . I venture on this digression merely for the sake of an old guide, who has always had a high character, and to the best of my knowledge has well deserved it.'

(6)

For some years old Taugwalder might have been seen waiting in vain for the employment which never came. His reputation had suffered from Whymper's attack. In the end, this outstanding Zermatt guide of the period left Zermatt and lived for some years in retirement in the United States, a fact which Whymper records with a faint expression of regret. Taugwalder returned to Zermatt and died suddenly on July 11, 1888, at the foot of the great mountain with which his name will always be associated.

Twenty-nine years later one of his grandsons saved the life of a young man who was born in the year that Taugwalder died. My second guide fell off one of the steep parts of the Matterhorn and dragged me with him, but Taugwalder held us both, and the one tribute which Whymper paid to old Taugwalder could certainly on that occasion have been applied with equal justice to the grandson who saved my life. ' Not only was his act at the critical moment wonderful as a feat of strength, but it was admirable in its performance at the right time.'

In the great drama of the Matterhorn three men stand out above all others, the three men who from the first believed that the mountain could be climbed, and who within a few days made the first ascents of the mountain on the Swiss and Italian sides: Whymper, Taugwalder and Carrel.

There is a brief reference to Taugwalder's death in the ALPINE JOURNAL. History has done full justice to Whymper and to Carrel, and now at last Carl Egger has remedied injustice by restoring old Taugwalder to the position which he should never have lost, a position of honour in the great triumvirate of the Matterhorn.