

FOOTNOTES TO ALPINE HISTORY

BY E. H. STEVENS

I. A FAMOUS ALPINE STORY

THERE is perhaps no Alpine story so often quoted—whether as a ‘cautionary tale’ or otherwise—as that of Melchior Anderegg’s ‘ich gehe nicht.’ It was first told—at any rate to a wide audience—in a notice of his beloved guide contributed by C. E. Mathews to *The Pioneers of the Alps*, published in 1887.¹ This is how he related it. ‘Melchior is one of those guides who combine the virtues both of prudence and of courage. He knows when it is right to go on and when it is the truest bravery to turn back. “Es geht, Melchior,” said a fine climber once in my hearing when we came to a dangerous spot. “Ja,” replied Melchior, “Es geht, aber ICH gehe nicht.”’ A little consideration suggests that the incident can hardly have happened just as Mathews tells it. It seems unlikely that a great expedition was actually abandoned because Melchior refused to attempt a passage which an amateur in the party considered—and Melchior admitted—to be practicable.

¹ The notice was reprinted, without comment, as one of Melchior’s obituaries in *A. J.* 29. 66 *sqq.*

A very different version was given by Sir Edward Davidson to Captain Farrar, both verbally ² and in an elaborate memorandum on Carrel's Galerie and the Zmutt ridge which he left to be handed to him in the event of his (Davidson's) death, and which Farrar published in the ALPINE JOURNAL ³ with most instructive notes. From these accounts it appears that in 1876 Davidson, Mathews and F. Morshead were on the summit of the Dent Blanche with Melchior, and the party discussed the possibility of ascending the Matterhorn by the Zmutt ridge. It was then that Melchior said 'Es geht, aber *ich* gehe nicht.' No mention is made by Davidson or Farrar of anyone having said 'Es geht, Melchior,' but on this point Mathews' recollection is probably reliable, and one may guess that it was Morshead who made the remark. Anyhow, Davidson tells that Melchior went on to justify his judgment. 'Anyone who wants to go that way must have a head of iron [*sc.* to resist falling stones]. That is something for . . . [Mr. Middlemore].' Davidson does not mention the name, but describes the climber in question as 'a well-known member of the Club who was then rather renowned for enterprise even to the verge of rashness.' Farrar is certainly right in identifying the description as referring to Middlemore, whose account of the first crossing of the Col des Grandes Jorasses ⁴ led to one of the most lively, not to say violent, controversies in the history of the Club. Middlemore had described the dangers he experienced from falling stones in the couloir on the Italian side of the pass, but rather incautiously defended his climb on the ground that one must face risks if one desired to achieve new expeditions. This doctrine was vehemently denounced by Leslie Stephen, Freshfield and A. W. Moore, but C. T. Dent and others supported Middlemore.⁵ Melchior no doubt knew all about this climb, since it was led by Hans Jaun, his own favourite pupil and devoted admirer. It is clear therefore that Melchior considered the Zmutt route, though practicable in itself, as exposed to unjustifiable risks from falling stones. Davidson points out that Mummery's original route (in 1879) was dangerous in its upper part (below Carrel's Galerie), but that the variation made in 1894 by Joseph Pollinger eliminates most of the dangerous portion. Pollinger, then under 21, was leading Mummery, Norman Collie and the Duke of the Abruzzi, and his variation consisted in working back from the slabs of the Tiefenmatten face (which have to be crossed for some distance when the party is forced off the Zmutt arête) on to that arête at a point a good way *below* the Galerie, instead of continuing up the face to reach it. This is now the normal route, and, as Davidson says, is not at all unduly risky.⁶

² A.J. 30. 184.

³ A.J. 37. 231.

⁴ A.J. 7. 225 sqq.

⁵ In 1874. *Loc. cit.* 279, 280, 311.

⁶ In September 1906 I was in Zermatt with two or three days to spare, and had the good fortune to ascend the Zmuttgrat, led by Ambros Supersaxo, senior, who was lent me for the occasion by Dr. Beckwith, an American physician and frequent visitor to the Alps. Many will remember 1906 as one of the finest seasons on record, but during the night frequent volleys of stones passed over or near our bivouac. On the climb itself, however, we did not see a single stone fall.

Three things strike one as noteworthy about the famous story. In the first place, though Davidson must have known Mathews' version of it in *Pioneers*, he made no reference thereto, but was content to put on record his own account without commenting on the erroneous version which had long since gained such extensive currency. Erroneous Mathews' version must surely be, both on the ground of its intrinsic improbability, and especially in view of Davidson's specific and detailed statement. But it is strange that Mathews' memory, only ten or eleven years after the event, should have played him so false as to the actual circumstances of the incident which, owing to his report of it, was to become of such historic interest.

Lastly, what of the light it throws upon Melchior's character? Consider the following quotations. Leslie Stephen wrote as follows in his account of the first ascent of the Zinal Rothorn: 'At this moment the weakest point in [Melchior's] character developed itself. He began to take a gloomy view of his prospects. "Jakob," he said, "we shall get up to that rock, and then . . ."' An ominous shake of the head supplied the rest of the sentence . . . Melchior's spirits, as usual, rose in proportion to the difficulty *when the die had once been cast* (my italics). Here is A. W. Moore's verdict on Melchior's part in their greatest climb—the ascent of Mont Blanc by the Brenva buttress.⁷ 'I have always considered it a providential circumstance that at this moment [*sc.* on reaching the Brenva ice-ridge] Jakob [Melchior's cousin], and not Melchior, was leading the party. Had [the latter] been in front, I believe that on seeing the nature of the work before us we should have halted, and discussed the propriety of proceeding, and I believe further that, as the result of that discussion, our expedition would have then and there come to an end.' It will be remembered that two years earlier Melchior had pronounced the project of an ascent by the Brenva route 'eine miserable Dummheit'—a wretched piece of folly. In another place I have ventured to sum this up as the opinion—weighty, no doubt, but actually as mistaken as his judgment of the Zmutt route—of 'the cautious, perhaps over cautious, Melchior.'⁸ However that may be, 'when the die had once been cast,' Melchior certainly did not fail to rise to the occasion, and extricated his party from the final difficulty of the sérac wall in brilliant fashion.

⁷ *The Alps in 1864* (Blackwell's Mountaineering Library), vol. II, p. 459.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*, p. 466, note 5.