HIMALAYAN APERY

'Look : where it comes again ! '

By H. W. TILMAN

[On February 1, 1955, Mr. J. A. Jackson read a paper at the Alpine Club on ' The Abominable Snowman.' Mr. Tilman here continues the interesting discussion which ensued.]

We centenarians, unless of a religious turn of mind, incline more to review the past than to speculate upon our future. Yet some of the more gifted of us are able at times to project our powerful minds into that questionable region, and what I dimly discern there, though it has no bearing upon it, may serve to introduce the present enquiry. Some new facts have come to light and I have a new theory to offer, just as our scientists (on whom be peace) are happy to propound a fresh theory of the Universe to fit any fresh discovery.

Thirty years on, or say about 1985, startling and conclusive evidence about the identity of the Abominable Snowman is reported by an all-Lancashire expedition engaged in climbing Everest by the South-east face, their hated Yorkshire rivals having already climbed it from the north-west. The news is confirmed by a small party of thirty from the Home Counties (sponsored by the *Sunday Telegraph* and *Home Chat*) who are about to complete their stint of twenty-six thousanders and thus qualify as ' Stakhanovites.' The Director of Mountaineering hears of this just as he is starting for his office in the Ministry of Sport, then at Hewlett House, a rather gorgeous Byzantine-Gothic, 20-story building on Camden Hill. Fairly enough, his office is on the top floor and as he climbs the stairs (for one notes with satisfaction there are no lifts) his craggy features wear a troubled expression, the effect partly of exertion and partly of the unwelcome news. For the Director has always stoutly maintained that the Snowman is a myth, a Capitalist fairy tale ; and in a broadcast only the previous night emphasised this view, pointing out that ever since the Sherpas gave up ' chang ' and took to Karl Marx, not even a footprint had been seen. And now the Press would be clamouring for the official line—indeed, even as he reached the office the bright red Rolls used by that pushing young ' staff climber ' from the *Daily Worker* drove up. At the thirteenth floor, while taking a breather, he is passed by his Secretary, an elderly but lissom woman. Annoyed at being overtaken by this virile spinster he merely grunts rudely when she remarks brightly that she has heard the news and is about to telephone the Secretary of the Alpine Club, who no doubt has the chequered history of this incorrigible animal upstart at his finger-tips.

Far from being defunct, in 1985 the Alpine Club is extremely prosperous, thanks mainly to its affluent offspring the Everest Foundation, a charity child and only semi-legitimate, yet in its early days not unmindful of its penurious parent. (Some years before this, of course, the Ministry took over the Foundation,[1] or rather its funds, which then amounted to nearly five million, the proceeds largely of the film ' The Traverse of Everest ' made in 1970, and also of some valuable patent rights in oxygen apparatus.) Strange to say the Club seems to have changed with the times, The new premises in Pollitt Place, formerly Grosvenor Place, are most commodious. The membership is mixed (sexually, I mean, as well as socially) and is restricted to Party members who have had three seasons in the Caucasus, the birth-place of mountaineering. The handful of old members who have been permitted to linger on to die in harness, as it were, are a little puzzled by some of the innovations. The life-size marble of Lenin in the entrance hall, for example, they take for one of our earlier Presidents, while the Hammer and Sickle device on the Club notepaper they assume to be a new-fangled ice-axe crossed, properly enough, with a geologist's hammer—though one greybeard has been heard muttering that it looks unpleasantly like a piton hammer. Happily for their peace of mind the Secretary is still the same—in spite of his ripe age only a semi-venerable figure—and on this particular occasion his memory proves equal in length to his years. Removing a Russian cigarette from beneath hirsute lips and thrusting aside the samovar, he picks up the receiver and unhesitatingly refers the lithe spinster at Hewlett House to the following pages.

Notwithstanding the formal abolition of the Abominable Snowman by the late F. S. Smythe nearly twenty years ago, recent evidence assures us that he is still with us, frightening Sherpas, making tracks in the more or less eternal snow, and astonishing our zoologists. I have often tried to picture what happened on that melancholy occasion in Garhwal in 1937, when the mere sight of some bear tracks in the snow provoked Frank Smythe to that uncalled-for piece of skulduggery. Readers of Boswell's *Hebrides* may remember the incident when the Doctor, in a manner unworthy of a philosopher, began reviling the roughness of the way and the awkwardness of his nag. The man leading it, whom Boswell in his pleasant way labels a common, ignorant, Highland clown, hoping to divert the great mind from present evils, points out some goats on the hillside : ' See the pretty goats,' he cries, whistling to make them jump. Something of the kind may have happened here. Instead of goats there were by ill luck these tracks, and

[1] On account perhaps of its Royal prefix the R.G.S. long had been extinguished. But it is an ill wind etc., for the Foundation thus felt free to lean heavily in the direction of pure mountaineering as opposed to pure science flavoured with mountains. Indeed the terms of the Trust came to be so widely interpreted that the roof climbers of Oxbridge frequently received grants towards the payments of any fines incurred.

the Sherpas, finding their Sahib a little irritable in the heat of the day, drew his attention to them. Smythe was interested enough to ask what made them and the Sherpas reply, 'Yeti,' experience having taught them that was what most Sahibs expected them to say. Fatal ! Little did they foresee the result of their rash answer. Smythe, who probably knew as well as they did what the tracks were, photographed them and submitted the prints to the two rival repositories of brute creation dead and alive respectively. The Natural History Museum and the Zoo both declared the tracks were made by a bear. Whereupon Smythe in an article in *The Times* announced that a Himalayan mystery was solved and that any tracks seen in the snow hitherto or hereafter must be bear tracks—a piece of reasoning on all fours with that classic example of a *non sequitur* : ' No wonder they call this place Stony Stratford, I was never so bitten by fleas in all my life.'

Among many letters to *The Times* commenting on this remarkable verdict only three disagreed with it, all three, though heavily disguised, from the same pen. The combined authority of Frank Smythe and *The Times* was too much. The Snowman seemed extinct and his friends stunned. The war came and the thing was forgotten. But with the opening of the Nepal Himalaya in 1948 the field of enquiry became much wider, and since unidentified tracks had been reported from places as far apart as the Upper Salween, Sikkim, Garhwal, and the Karakorum, it was merely a question of time before they were seen in Nepal. In the course of his travels there the present writer saw no tracks, but enquiries made in the Langtang valley revealed that the Snowman was not only well known but had at one time resided there. In the Langtang few people read *The Times*, so that when they showed me a cave where five years before a Snowman had lived they were not aware that precisely five years before that Smythe had shown him to be non-existent.

What had been confidently expected happened in 1951 when the Everest reconnaissance party found and photographed the familiar tracks. It was 1937 over again. *The Times* blandly accorded as much space to his resurrection as it had to his burial, while the Natural History Museum and the Zoo held another foot inspection. Futile ! As yet the maker of these tracks is tenant neither of a glass case nor a cage. The feet of the langur monkey and the bear were suggested as an approximate fit. Unluckily it could not be both. The bear was dropped in favour of the monkey although the foot of the largest specimen available fell more than 4 in. short of the required length. Moreover, to get over the difficulty that the tracks were obviously those of a biped it had to be assumed that the langur was bounding on all fours. (A lively beggar he must have been, too, to keep this up for over a mile at 18,000 ft., presumably without oxygen.) The absence of any tail marks also caused surprise, for his tail is almost as long as his body. One supposes that in the autumn at this altitude langurs wrap their tails round their necks like mufflers or deposit them at the tree-line some 6,000 ft. below. Nevertheless, monkeys and men are

primates, so the pundits were getting nearer the mark. It is worth noting that on the several occasions when tracks have been followed neither droppings nor odd hairs have been found. A hairy-footed animal like a bear, for example, plodding through snow for any time would almost certainly shed some loose hairs.

Irked, no doubt, by the monopoly of *The Times* in the Snowman as well as in Everest, in 1954 the *Daily Mail* sent a party to investigate.[2]

Before offering the explanation which I feel must be accepted, I give two accounts by reputed eye-witnesses. In 1948 below the Zemu Gap (where, by the way, Sir John Hunt and the writer on separate occasions have observed unidentified tracks) two Norwegians, Thorberg and Frostis, accompanied by two Indian surveyors and a Sherpa, saw two large ape-like creatures. Being on skis the Norwegians tried to head them off and were attacked for their pains, Frostis having his shoulder bitten. Thorberg fired at the other and both made off. This story, in much greater detail, is quoted by Professor Dyhrenfurth in his book with the fanciful title *To the Third Pole*,[3] giving as his authority a book, *J'ai recontré l'homme des neiges* (Pour Tous, Lausanne, 1952), by Thorberg, ' Doctor of Engineering,' Oslo University. Though it would strengthen my case to accept this story without question, loyalty to truth obliged me to make some enquiries. In Darjeeling, where Frostis is supposed to have been taken to hospital, neither Europeans nor Sherpas have heard the story. The Norwegian Consul-General in Calcutta has no record of Messrs. Thorberg and Frostis. The Norske Tindeklub knows nothing of them, and Oslo University, which,

[2] Neither our knowledge nor their circulation benefited much from this enterprise, which I mention mainly because of the opportunity it affords for explaining the term ' staff climber ' apparently in current use by 1984. Owing to the great public interest in Himalayan affairs and the difficulty the ordinary reporter had in intruding upon an expedition half-way up a mountain, most of the big Dailies which survived—those, namely, which had ' gone forward with the people' fast enough—employed a staff climber. This job, so much sought after by our members, meant spending most summers in the Himalaya flitting from mountain to mountain criticising the tactics and reporting the progress of expeditions in the field—the deaths by drowning or pneumonia, from too much oxygen or the lack of it, from malnutrition, overdoses of sleeping tablets or benzedrine, or from mere climbing accidents. And when mixed parties became the vogue, stories of warm, human interest were commonly the result. Nor were international incidents rare, the most celebrated occurring in the seventies when an all-Sherpa party and a party of Chinese students from the Rongbuk University M.C. attempted the same mountain by the same route, a mistake having been made in the annual allotment of peaks by the Nepal Priorities Office. Which in turn arose through the confusion caused by a nonsensical habit of some foreigners who, from pedantry or pique, like to bestow their own names upon mountain features rather than use those familiar to all (i.e. ourselves) through long use and wont. On this occasion, ice-axe blows having been exchanged, the dispute came before the United Nations Assembly and gave that body one of its worst headaches ; the Rongbuk Club, of course, being backed by the Soviet block and the Sherpas by what were then popularly called the Coca-Cola countries.

[3] This story is not in the original German edition, but appears in the English version (1955).—EDITOR.

by the way, has no Engineering Faculty, knows nothing either. Finally there is a suspicion that the Lausanne book is equally mythical. Professor Dyhrenfurth evidently belongs to that numerous class of whom one is born every minute. That Professor Dyhrenfurth is prone to believe all he hears is evident from his remarks in the same book about the 1938 Everest expedition in which though the hand is the hand of Dyhrenfurth the voice is the querulous voice of that other eminent Professor of our own who took part.

The second account for which the authority is neither better nor worse—it is one of the Sunday papers—is as follows: Slavomir Rawicz, a Polish officer who in 1942 escaped from a Soviet prison camp and got away through Mongolia, China, and Tibet, when crossing the Himalaya somewhere near the Tang La watched for two hours a creature which he describes as 'a cross between a bear and an orang-utan, massive, over 7 ft. high, arms reaching to the knees, and a square head, the occiput of the head making a straight line with the back. He was covered with reddish brown hair and walked with a comical swinging motion.' Comical enough, no doubt, always provided such an ugly customer is walking *away* from the observer.

Supposing we take Slavomir at his word, his description tallies with what the tracks seen in 1951 would suggest, namely something bigger than the biggest langur ever foaled, that has no tail, and that normally walks on two legs. Now although the zoologists ought not to try to fob us off with a substitute, they are hardly to be blamed for not producing what they have not got. The anthropologist, on the other hand, labours under no such handicap. For him the writ of *habeas corpus* does not run; he is not required to produce even a skeleton. With a mere fragment of skull or a fossilised tooth he will construct a speaking likeness of our own and the apes' ancestors for half a million years back. And we bow in reverence, wide-eyed with admiration, not so much for our ancestors but for the anthropologist's skill. If then we meekly accept Pithecanthropus, Neanderthal man, Heidelberg man, and the rest, so cleverly reconstructed from such flimsy data as a piece of bone, must we not accept a similar reconstruction from the surer basis of a well defined footprint? Let us see what an expert makes of the 1951 footprints.

Vladimir Tchernezky, a graduate of Kiev University, having made such a reconstruction, published his conclusions in the *Manchester Guardian* in an article of which I give the gist. Comparing the footprints with drawings of the foot of a mountain gorilla and of Neanderthal man, 'A cursory glance,' he says, 'is enough to convince us that the footprints have been made by a primate in whom are combined the features of a human and of an anthropoid ape. If we were to reconstruct the footprint of some being intermediate between ape and man, for example Pithecanthropus, it would be similar to this photograph. The footprint of the Snowman is 12.5 in. long which is not less than that of the largest gorilla. It is at least one and a half times as broad, so that this enigmatic anthropoid of the Himalaya must be larger

and heavier than the greatest of known anthropoid apes. . . . As is well known the plantar surface of the monkey is much narrower than that of man, especially in the region of the heel. The breadth and massive structure of the heel of the Snowman is most impressive. This ' human ' character is even more pronounced than in modern man and in Neanderthal man ; accordingly we can conclude that this creature has extraordinarily massive legs. The length of the stride is about 2 ft. 6 in., equal to the stride of a 6-ft. man. Neanderthal man or Pithecanthropus has relatively shorter legs and a more massive body than contemporary man which suggests that the Snowman is of huge size, not less than 7 ft. high. . . . The palaeontological discoveries made by von Königswald have proved the existence of gigantic forms among the fossil anthropoids. In a Chinese druggist's shop in Hong Kong von Königswald found three molar teeth of a giant anthropoid, three times as big as the corresponding teeth of a gorilla and six times as big as the teeth of contemporary man. He called this form Gigantopithecus. The structure of the teeth is intermediate between ape and man. Weidenreich names the creature Gigantanthropus. Embryological data may be used to determine the systematic position of the Snowman. . . . Thus he is not very nearly related to the genus ' homo ' but is a more highly developed form than any known living anthropoid. According to all that has been said it is to be expected that a new form of higher anthropoid will soon be discovered. This form will either be related to the fossil Gigantopithecus or may either be a living representative of this most extraordinary member of the primate family, for such the Abominable Snowman appears to be.

Upon this an erudite friend comments that Weidenreich, as every schoolboy knows, called the owner of these fearful dentures Gigantanthropus as the creature was definitely a giant man and not a giant ape ; and adds that if no one quarrels with the age of the teeth, estimated by Weidenreich at 450,000–550,000 years, there would be no logical reason to dismiss the Gigantanthropus-Snowman relationship. Anyhow, Tchernezky's masterly synthesis seems to me to settle the matter. To those who still doubt I commend a remark, attributed to the great Lord Halifax, that nothing has an uglier look than reason when it is not on our side. A remark which in this instance applies with double force, for obviously Gigantanthropus with his formidable stature and massive legs, his efficient grinders glinting through wisps of auburn hair, is no beauty.