JOSEF KNUBEL[1]

By ALFRED ZÜRCHER

(Translated by Hugh Merrick)

Josef Knubel died in hospital at Visp on May 31, 1961, following an abdominal operation. His fellow guides bore the slight burden of his body to his grave at St. Niklaus. For 'Little J.', as Young called him, was never a heavy man; and the cares of his last years of enforced idleness had eroded rather than filled out his small frame. Yet, with what an immeasurable weight did Josef's passing fall upon his friends; how suddenly was his towering stature as a man made manifest; how gigantic were seen to be the achievements of his long life. . . .

As Josef Knubel's 'Herr' through many years and his friend to the last day, I hope I may be permitted in these pages to cast a last short glance over the life and triumphs of this unique character among guides.

Josef Knubel, the son of a guide and wood-cutter, Peter Knubel, was born at St. Niklaus on March 2, 1881. His childhood days were no different from those of his contemporaries. He was soon involved in all the work in the fields and in the barn, on the alp and in the forest; when minding the goats and wielding a scythe on the slopes he very soon showed the toughness, endurance, self-reliance and perfect security of movement, on no matter what terrain, which were to be lifelong characteristics.

His mountaineering activities, too, began early in life. When he was only fifteen, his father allowed him to accompany him and a client on a climb of the Matterhorn. What a promising start he made is shown in a first entry still to be seen in Peter's *Führerbuch*.

> 'Peter Knubel asked me to let his 15-year-old son Josef come along with us on an ascent of the Matterhorn, and I agreed. The boy did so well that I took him along as a porter on Monte Rosa, the Dom and an attempt on the Zinal Rothorn. The said Josef Knubel climbs extremely well and is apparently tireless. Nobody need hesitate to take the boy as a porter on big climbs.
>
> Ch. Dupont. SAC. Sect. UTO.
> Zermatt, July 21st, 1896.'

[1] Obituary notices and a photograph of Josef Knubel appeared in *A.J.* 67. 205 *sqq.*

The next 'Herr' worth quoting was the American, Oliver Perry-Smith. In 1903 with Knubel he climbed the Matterhorn, Wellenkuppe, Zinal Rothorn, Weisshorn, Lyskamm, Gabelhorn, Dent Blanche, repeating the Matterhorn and descending by the Italian Ridge. In August of the same year Josef led his Philadelphian client over the Teufelsgrat to the Täschhorn in twelve hours, climbing the highest gendarme, probably for the first time in history, for extra measure. Perry-Smith's entry in the paternal book includes this passage: 'Josef Knubel is the best climber in Zermatt, even if he is too young to have a testimonial book of his own.'

In fact, it was not till June 27 of the following year (1904) that Josef got his licence.

At the time when Josef Knubel began his official life as a guide, there were few, if any, peaks in the Alps which had not been climbed in summer. Knubel, however, belonged to that famous fraternity of St. Niklaus guides, whose impeccable technique, exceptional toughness and splendid route-finding talents were already giving a new impetus to mountaineering in the Alps. So, with numerous new lines of approach to the summits still waiting to be opened up, with many of the great traverses as yet untried, and with ski-trails almost unknown on the snows of the four thousand metre peaks, there was much still to be done. In the sphere of high alpine ski-running and touring, and of spring and winter climbs using ski *en route*, Josef Knubel can definitely be regarded as a pioneer. On December 17, 1925, the Judicial and Police Department of the Valais authorised him, after a highly successful test, to act as a ski-guide. His success in the test is foreshadowed by the following entry, five years earlier, in his *Führerbuch*:—

'February 1920.

Knubel and I have at last been able to put into practice the following projects hatched as long ago as 1917:

Feb. 3rd. WELLENKUPPE AND OBERGABELHORN. First winter ascents. From Trift, on ski as far as the snowy N.E. shoulder of the Wellenkuppe.

Feb. 4th. SCHALLIHORN. First winter ascent. From Trift, on ski to the Upper Schallijoch.

Feb. 7th. TÄSCHHORN. First winter ascent. From the Täschalp by the ridge to the Mischabeljoch. Ski were only used up to the foot of the Weingarten moraines.

Feb. 10th. MATTERHORN. Fourth winter ascent. We had to abandon the Zmutt traverse because of the cold and the wind. The mountains were mainly in excellent condition and took no longer than in summer. Knubel was

JOSEF KNUBEL (RIGHT) AND ALFRED ZÜRCHER ON THE SUMMIT OF THE NORDEND, AUGUST 26, 1940—THE TWO HUNDREDTH OCCASION ON WHICH THEY CLIMBED A 4,000 METRE PEAK TOGETHER.

To face p. 270

as energetic and brilliant as usual. I consider him the best guide in the Zermatt Valley, summer or winter.

MARCEL KURZ.
Ing. SAC. AACZ.'

I have, however, skipped what was probably the most important chapter in Josef Knubel's story—the years from 1906 to 1914, which found him engaged, in the company of Geoffrey Winthrop Young, on the biggest and finest climbs in the Alps. At the time many a long ridge was awaiting its first ascent, whole rows of peaks had never been traversed, new routes up old peaks were there for the seeking and finding. Young sought and found them; Knubel led up them. Only the most important of the climbs made by this wonderful partnership during those summers are mentioned in the following list:—

CHARMOZ-GRÉPON. Traverse in a single day.
WEISSHORN. First direct ascent of the South-east face.
DENT DU REQUIN. Ascent and descent of the South-east ridge from the glacier.
CHARMOZ-GRÉPON-BLAITIÈRE (Central and Northern summits): all four traversed in one day.
TÄSCHHORN. First ascent of the South face with Ryan, and the two guides Franz and Joseph Lochmatter.
BREITHORN. First ascent of the Klein Triftje (Younggrat).
RIMPFISCHHORN. First ascent of the East face.
ZINAL ROTHORN. First ascent of the East face.
WEISSHORN. First direct ascent of the North-east face.
GRANDES JORASSES. First ascent of the West ridge; first descent of the Hirondelles ridge.
MEIJE. Traverse in 6 hours 20 minutes.
GRÉPON. First direct ascent from the Mer de Glace.
BROUILLARD RIDGE (MONT BLANC). First ascent.
GSPALTENHORN. First ascent of the West ridge.

Young, who apart from his immense talents as a mountaineer possessed in unusual measure the gift of words, left in his writings about his friend and guide a monument that will outlast all others.

Over the years Knubel led about a hundred and twenty climbers on big climbs (some of them ranking as the greatest climbs of all). Among them we find resounding names; Eustace Thomas, Graham Brown, Meade, Todhunter, Amery and Lunn. The list could easily be extended.

Knubel made more than eight hundred ascents of 'Four Thousanders' in his life; and since I was with him on more than two hundred of them, perhaps it will not be considered presumptuous if I mention a few of the more important climbs we did together:

First ascent of Piz Bernina by the western ice-wall, descending by Piz Bianco and the Biancograt.

First ascent of the Eiger's North-east face (Lauper route), with Alexander Graven and Hans Lauper.

First traverse of the Grandes Jorasses from the Couvercle to the Grandes Jorasses hut in 23 hours, taking in Point Young, Punta Margherita, Punta Helena, Point Whymper and Point Walker.

First double traverse of Mont Blanc in three days. Up the Peuterey Ridge and over the Aiguille Blanche to the Vallot hut; Mont Blanc —descent by the Brouillard Ridge via Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, Pic Luigi Amedeo, Mont Brouillard and Col Emile Rey.

First double traverse of the Weisshorn by all four ridges,[2] on successive days.

Josef Knubel never underrated a climb on which he was about to embark. He was rather inclined to hang back, leaving his clients to provide the 'drive'. He could even produce the most specious objections before he was committed to a given climb; but once under way he always excelled himself. I recall Young's account of the first ascent of the Weisshorn's North-east face:—

'For no reason except that the sun was now warming his spine, Josef at this point dashed ahead, struck an attitude, and exclaimed—"Who follows me this day will reach the summit!"'

One cannot say that 'le meilleur guide' was exactly at home with map and compass. These were articles he just did not need. His sense of direction was fantastic. Any route he had once followed etched itself on his memory so indelibly that he could find it again, year in and year out, even at night or in dense fog.

The number and severity of the climbs already listed speak for themselves and testify to Knubel's ability. His caution and deep sense of responsibility are established by the fact that he accomplished them all without a mishap worthy of mention and certainly without a single fatal accident. 'My responsibility begins', he was wont to say, 'when I leave the hut and only ends when I am back on trodden paths.' And he never tired of indoctrinating the young guides with this sense of duty and the consciousness of their responsibilities.

His enthusiasm for the mountains made him well-disposed to all, including guideless climbers, whenever he saw that skill and enjoyment went hand in hand. But if, among his hills, he met with the bungler, the rash or the careless, his manner and vocabulary could embrace every nuance from sullen aversion to blazing scorn.

Josef's relations with his mountain were very personal. If his efforts on some peak proved unsuccessful for one reason or another, or, worse

[2] i.e., the three main ridges and the 'arête Young' on the West face—EDITOR.

still, if he had to leave rope behind, as with Young on the Grépon, he was quite ready to curse the mountain and could hardly wait for the first possible opportunity of wiping out the affront with interest. Once, not far from the Monte Rosa hut, he went down a few feet into a small glacier-crevasse, only to be hauled out immediately by Hermann Lochmatter. He was so annoyed by this little blot on his technique that he unroped in a fury and rushed off towards the hut close by. But when he had achieved anything really worth while, he used to hold himself straight as a ramrod, as pleased as any child at his own success. And there were times enough to justify his pleasure.

Knubel's fitness was proverbial, his toughness unmatched. Young once referred to the 'neat, small framework of steel and whalebone that serves him for a body'. The few breaks in his mountaineering activities never left him inactive. In winter you could find him at his work as a stonemason or a tree-feller; in the autumn in pursut of game —unless you were a gamekeeper. His toughness is evidenced by the occasion when he walked from the Concordia hut down to Fiesch suffering from appendicitis, which was to keep him in a hospital bed for three weeks when he arrived there.

He was a heavy smoker. It was in keeping with his temperament that he preferred the strong, blackish products of the local cheroot industry to a more gentle pipe. Once, when we were climbing the Zmuttgrat, he puffed out such a concentration of stinging smoke-wreaths behind him that in the end I had a violent attack of coughing. Josef gave me a pitying smile, but quietly stubbed out his Montheyer and just lengthened his stride a little.

Shortly before he died, he had to go down to Visp for that last serious abdominal operation. As he was walking up the steep road to the hospital with his fellow guide, Hermann Lochmatter, a man thirty years younger than himself, who was recovering from a bad accident, Josef noticed that his friend was puffing a little. 'Anyway, I can breathe more easily than you', he quipped, his little eyes flashing with pride.

Josef Knubel's last breath, too, was easily drawn. Not even the severe blows fate dealt him in his later years, the injury to his knee sustained on the Ortler which prevented his ever climbing again, the death of a beloved wife and adopted daughter within days of one another, could break his spirit. Deep-rooted in a dalesman's simple faith, he bore his trials with submission; if anyone could ever lift his eyes without a qualm to the great vault above the hills, it was he.

Josef Knubel took his religious duties very seriously, always attending Mass before and after a big climb. Nor did he like to hear God's name taken in vain. The most his temperament allowed him to utter was a spontaneously ejaculated 'Jessas' or an occasional 'Holy Smoke'.

Once, on the East ridge of the Weisshorn, when I started cursing about some trifling matter, he read me the following lecture: 'I don't suppose our Master up there'—and he pointed to the radiant sky—'will be taking much pleasure in the conversation of my master down here.' I took his point.

Knubel's good works were done in secret. He was very put out when I discovered by chance that, after a highly successful series of big climbs in the Mont Blanc group, he pressed into the hand of Courmayeur's vicar a sum out of all keeping with his status, for the poor of the village. He hated publicity and steered clear of it. That made the recognition accorded him by his famous clients all the more precious. He loved to talk about their adventures together in the closed circle of his friends, over a glass of wine; then he would once again grow truly animated. His eyes would recover their keen sparkle and his whole being would glow with the old enthusiasm.

Let us then remember Josef Knubel, and let me end this tribute to him with some words of his own:

'Herr "Jung" praised me quite enough; what more could one want than that?'