

WHYMPER AGAIN

BY ARNOLD LUNN

I READ with great interest and some little profit *A Word for Whympers: A Reply to Sir Arnold Lunn* in the last issue of the *A.J.* Messrs. D. F. O. Dangar and T. S. Blakeney, hereinafter referred to as 'my critics', make some good points and if *Matterhorn Centenary* is reprinted I will make one or two minor corrections. If their object was to represent Whympers in the most and myself in the least favourable light, they were wise to omit everything I said in Whympers's praise and to ignore instead of quoting and conceding those of my criticisms which they could not answer.

I started with a strong prejudice in Whympers's favour. Of his famous book I wrote in *The Mountains of Youth* that it 'was the first book which I laboriously spelt out for myself, and even today there are few books which I can re-read with greater pleasure than Whympers's great classic'.

In *A Century of Mountaineering* I wrote (p. 61): 'At its best Whympers's writing has a simplicity and directness which recalls the Greeks. There is indeed something of Greek simplicity and Greek irony in the story of the Matterhorn triumph and tragedy.'

In *Matterhorn Centenary* I wrote (p. 72): 'Many eminent mountaineers have contributed to the history of the Matterhorn by forcing new routes up its cliffs, but the Matterhorn remains Whympers's mountain, partly perhaps because he himself had something of the indomitable character of that great peak with the result that we tend, as Geoffrey Winthrop Young rightly says, to identify him in our memory with the greatness of the Matterhorn . . . (p. 75). At its best Whympers's writing has a simplicity and directness which in his description of the Matterhorn tragedy challenges comparison with Thucydides.'

It is characteristic of my critics that they misrepresent a very sincere tribute as a denigration. They suggest that I implied, in their words not mine, that 'Whympers was "out of things" in the A.C. for reasons of social status'. What I actually wrote was in terms of warm praise of Whympers for being 'serenely unconscious of the social gulf' between him and so many members of the A.C. 'He gate-crashed', I wrote, 'into their society without realising the existence of any barriers . . . Whympers had at least one characteristic of greatness, superb self-confidence. He was uninterested in and therefore uninfluenced by class distinctions.'

I am attacked for the 'mistaken contention that Whympers's part in the

illustrations to *Scrambles* was limited to the provision of the "slight memoranda" referred to in the preface.' Whymper had expressed his indebtedness to James Mahoney 'for the care and fidelity with which he followed my slight memoranda and for the spirit he put into his admirable designs' and I do not think the attempts which have been made to explain away this explicit statement are particularly convincing. Anyhow I do not see why I should be attacked for assuming that Whymper meant what he wrote.

My criticisms of Whymper are that he had an inadequate sense of truth and that his attitude to other mountaineers was in certain cases, described below, worse than uncharitable. It is that which worries me, not his tendency to invent picturesque details. In *Scrambles* he records his descent of the Gorner glacier with a long dramatic description of nerving himself for a jump over a crevasse. 'First retreating as far as possible, I ran forward with all my might, took the leap, barely reached the other side, and fell awkwardly on my knees. Almost at the same moment a shower of stones fell on the spot from which I had jumped.' We possess what he wrote about the same expedition in his diary. 'It took me three-quarters of an hour to get down 350 feet I should think. Once on the glacier, moving was pretty easy, though the crevasses at the side rendered *getting on it* a work of time to a novice.' Not a word about the dramatic jump.

Again he represents Carrel as saying on his return from the attempt on the Matterhorn which coincided with Whymper's victory, 'The old legends are true—there are spirits on the top of the Matterhorn. We saw them ourselves—they hurled stones at us.' But Carrel did not mistake Whymper for a demon. He recognised him by his white trousers and sadly reported the British victory. My critics admit that Whymper 'overdramatised the fog-bow' seen on the descent from the first ascent of the Matterhorn, the fog-bow which provided the frontispiece to *Scrambles*. Why are they so reluctant to admit that the picture of the Ecrins gap was also over-dramatised? If this gap ever existed, what has happened to it? Why did it not become as famous as the Mummery Crack? Why did not subsequent parties photograph or at least sketch the Whymper gap? I do not claim to have made an exhaustive search of all Alpine periodicals but I have yet to find an account of the Ecrins which specifically mentions this gap. Can my critics provide a reference to such an account? I have consulted the G.H.M. *Guide du Massif des Ecrins* in the A.C. library and there is no reference to this gap in the text. It would, I suggest, be an excellent plan if the A.C. committee induced two or three of our members to photograph this famous gap and provide an exact description for the *A. J.*

It is consistent with my critics' intention to represent me in the worst possible light to imply that I endorsed everything which Coolidge said

against Whympers, but was it fair to repeat Coolidge's story that 'Moore was a bit of a swell and Whympers grated on him' without quoting my comment, 'his gloss on a certain incident described by Whympers in *Scrambles* was characteristic of Coolidge's feline malice'? How could my critics possibly imply after this that I agreed with Coolidge's view of the relations between Moore and Whympers?

Had my critics written to me after my earlier books in which most of my criticisms were published I should have been grateful, and corrected in *Matterhorn Centenary* the few points on which their criticisms are sound, and this with all the greater pleasure because of my great debt to *Scrambles*.

Again and again in their article my critics, as we shall see, either misquote some source or give a definite twist to facts. 'It took', they wrote, 'about three-quarters of a century before anybody got up to defend the Taugwalders.' They are writing of the Zermatters, and the implication is that the Zermatters only after my article appeared, rushed to the Taugwalders' defence. *Berglers* in point of fact avoid controversy with tourists. Guides have often been attacked or criticised in the *A.J.* but I do not remember any letter in the *A.J.* from *Berglers* protesting against such attacks. When my defence of the Taugwalders appeared in the *A.J.* Otto Furrer thanked me and conveyed the impression that some such reply to Whympers' monstrously unjust attack had been expected—for we still have a reputation for a sense of justice—and that my defence was better late than never.

Frank Smythe, whose boyhood hero Whympers had been, had put the best construction on Whympers' attacks on the Taugwalders in his life of Whympers but, after reading my article in the *A.J.*, came down on the side of the Taugwalders and, in his preface to the new edition of Whympers' book on the Andes described the suggestion that the weak rope was deliberately selected as a 'vile insinuation without any valid foundation'. Do my critics agree that the insinuation was indeed *vile*, and if they do agree why should they be so anxious to denigrate poor Taugwalder, even to the extent of misquoting Leslie Stephen to attribute to him an attack on the Taugwalders which he never made? Stephen is alleged to have accused Taugwalder of 'habitual carelessness'. Here is what Leslie Stephen actually wrote: '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 an 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 almost equally responsible; and, at any rate, *such accusations should have some more tangible ground than a vague possibility*'. (Italics mine.)

My critics describe this defence of the Taugwalders as 'a very lame one'. Could anti-Taugwalder prejudice go further? Nothing could be less lame than this decisive exposure of Whymper's 'vile insinuation'. Anybody less prejudiced than my critics would not need to be told that there is a world of difference between accusing a guide of deliberately putting a weak rope between him and his client, almost the worst crime which a guide could commit, and mere carelessness—'To defend a guide's misdeed on the plea', write my critics, 'that it was not deliberate but merely habitual carelessness is a very qualified extenuation'. Stephen wrote *nothing* even faintly tolerant of the interpretation that he was accusing Taugwalder of 'habitual carelessness'. What he did write was clearly intended to clear Taugwalder of sole responsibility. 'Croze was almost equally responsible', and the oversight could easily be accounted for by 'the probable state of excitement of the whole party'.

Herr C. Egger, author of many scholarly articles on mountaineering history, argued in *Die Alpen*, July 1940, that Whymper wished to deflect attention from himself to his guides in order to diminish his responsibility for the accident. After all he was one of the two amateur leaders of the party.

I quoted Knubel's remark that Whymper was not liked in the valley, and Knubel was certainly not the only Zermatter to say this. Characteristic of my critics' controversial methods is the following comment. 'In view of Lunn's remarks, often made, that Swiss peasants do not easily reveal their minds and tend very readily to say what their interrogator wants to hear (a characteristic not at all confined to the Swiss), one would like to know whether Knubel had sensed Lunn's dislike of Whymper and was saying what would please him to hear.'

Mountain people have sometimes let a climber believe he was making a first ascent of a peak which had, in fact, been already climbed. Wills, for instance, thought that he was making the first ascent of the Wetterhorn and other instances could be cited of visitors being left under similar innocent illusions, but it is insensitive to equate the casual relations of *Berglers* with visitors to their valley with that close friendship between a guide and an amateur with whom he has climbed season after season. I look back on my friendship with Knubel as one of the best things that the mountains have given me. In our long talks I learned much from him about the mountain people and the mountain way of life. Knubel was a man of outstanding integrity. I am unruffled by my critics' personal attacks on me, but their petty denigration of Knubel, represented as a man who would tell a lie about Whymper to please me, has, I admit, nettled me.

My critics have paid a tribute to my contribution to Anglo-Swiss relations, and it was these relations which explain my original involvement in this controversy. It seemed to me un-English to bring the

vilest of accusations against a guide without, as Stephen said, 'a particle of direct evidence in its favour'. I was sorry that it was so long before any member of the A.C. dissociated himself from these charges and that only one prominent member of the Club said what so badly needed to be said, and then only in *Macmillan's Magazine*. Hence my article in the *A.ſ.*

It seems to be impossible for my critics to defend Whympers without putting the worst construction on everything which the Taugwalders did. A pity, for their reputation in their own valley was good. *Berglers* do not readily subscribe to erect monuments to fellow *Berglers*, but a monument was erected to the Taugwalders on the instigation of Abbé Julien. 'We wished to make it known,' the Abbé said to me, 'that we knew they had done their duty'.

This somewhat acrimonious controversy will have been worth while if it helps to clarify an important chapter in alpine history. I am sure my critics are as anxious as I am to write as historians and not as partisans briefed to defend Whympers or the Taugwalders. My critics have convinced me that Whympers's mountaineering record was far finer than Hudson's, that his knowledge of the French language was greater than I thought, and that on one or two other minor details I was wrong, i.e. that the 'sharp-eyed boy' who reported an avalanche on the Matterhorn at the time of the accident was not one of Whympers's picturesque inventions, and that there was far more interest at Zermatt when the party was reported on the summit than I had been led to believe.

I am sure I am not unduly sanguine in my confidence that my critics agree with me

(a) that there is not a particle of evidence to support Whympers's insinuation that a weak rope had been *deliberately* put between Taugwalder and Douglas, and

(b) that this vile insinuation should never have been made.

My own prejudices, or rather postjudices, against Whympers are provoked by his very unpleasant attitude to three mountaineers. My critics have tried to belittle his attack on Taugwalder, but they wisely ignore two other cases which I mentioned of Whympers's denigration of other mountaineers. Perhaps they could reassure me that their view does not differ from mine on

(c) Whympers's statement to the Secretary of the A.C. that he spent a miserable night on the Matterhorn after the accident, fearing that the Taugwalders might murder him;

(d) on the fact that Whympers, according to Graham Brown writing as editor of the *A.ſ.*, 'allowed his bitterness against Hudson to appear in an unfair attack';

(e) on the following summary of an article in *A.ſ.* 57. 339-40, which seems to me far more damaging to Whympers than any of Coolidge's

attacks and which certainly had a far greater influence in prejudicing me against Whympers than anything which Coolidge wrote or said.

The Alpine Club has been presented with Whympers own copy of Mummery's *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*. Against Freshfield's tribute quoted in the preface, 'his untimely death is a grievous loss to the Club', Whympers wrote, 'I do not agree'. In *The Sphere*, January 30, 1909, Whympers reviewed the book and described it as a 'vicious' book. A memorandum pasted inside the volume shows that in the event of the review provoking comment he intended to try and belittle Mummery by quoting 'my times across Col Dolent against his across the Col des Courtes, and my times on the Aig Verte against his times'. He then speculates on the condition in which Mummery's body is likely to be should traces of it be found. 'It will be', he says, 'in the shape of a dislocated skeleton, one bone here and another there. . . . The stomach and heart will be nowhere.' Mrs. Mummery, be it noted, was alive when this review appeared. He concludes his review by postulating that in certain important matters Mummery was insane.

It is perhaps not surprising that my critics make no comment on my quotation of this passage, the writer of which by the way was T. S. Blakeney. I am rash enough to hope that in spite of our many differences of opinion about Whympers we agree in our views about Whympers review of Mummery's book. It is pleasant to end a controversial article on a note of cordial agreement.

[We have read Lunn's article with attention, and welcome the friendly-cum-combative spirit in which it is written. We must confine these remarks mainly to the five particular points he raises on p. 232, but a few general criticisms may be made.

Lunn's opening paragraphs seem rather beside the point; we naturally concentrated mostly on matters of disagreement, rather than those occasions when Lunn has a good word for Whympers. But we did say (*A.J.* 71. 128) that Lunn agreed that Whympers had an aura of greatness about him. Lunn charges us with anti-Taugwalder prejudice, but what we have been trying to do ever since we commented on Lunn's extravagant claims for Old Peter (*A.J.* 61. 500-2) is to get at the facts about Taugwalder, and deflate the fancies.

Lunn says he meant it as a tribute to Whympers that he seemed 'out of things' in the A.C.; it strikes us as unusual to speak of 'gate-crashing' as a compliment, and, taken in conjunction with the 'great swell' nonsense of Coolidge, we find it difficult to doubt that Lunn's original intention was to assert that Whympers was socially unacceptable. We had said enough about Coolidge's warped outlook to make it needless to add Lunn's reference to 'feline malice', as Lunn had never indicated that he disbelieved Coolidge. The story is repeated at least three times (*Mountain*

Jubilee, p. 206; *Century of Mountaineering*, p. 60; *Matterhorn Centenary*, p. 42).

On the topic of Whymper's illustrations, Lunn persists in missing the point that unless Whymper's basic memoranda or sketches were fairly detailed, neither Mahoney nor anyone else who had not been on such sites as the top of the Col Dolent, *could* have made such accurate drawings. All Lunn now asserts is that Whymper was generous in praise of Mahoney—who has ever questioned it?

We have not been in the least 'reluctant to admit' that the Ecrins leap picture was over-dramatised; indeed, we drew attention to Ulrich Almer's comment in that respect. What we contested (with ample evidence) was Lunn's contention that the gap in the ridge never existed; as Schuster (*Postscript to Adventure*, p. 203) notes, Horace Walker's testimony alone is enough to destroy the whole Coolidge thesis. Even now Lunn writes that he has yet to find an account of the Ecrins specifically mentioning this gap—yet we gave him one (*A.J.* 71. 113, line 3). And he hardly needs to be reminded that, over a hundred years, a shattered mountain ridge is likely to change its form; there is no comparison with the Mummery crack and photos today would probably be useless.

As regards Leslie Stephen, Lunn has quoted more than once how Otto Furrer said he (Lunn) was the first to speak up for Old Taugwalder, and, substantially, Furrer was correct, since Stephen's review had lain forgotten for so many years. But there had been no dearth of writing about the Matterhorn in the meantime, and no lack of distinguished Swiss writers who might have spoken up for Taugwalder years before Lunn went into action. Yet they did not.

Turning to Lunn's five points:

(a) Whymper did not accuse Taugwalder of deliberately using a weak rope; he dealt with the awkward fact that such a rope was used. The Official Enquiry had also to deal with this; it was such an obvious difficulty that any Enquiry would have been badly at fault had it been slurred over. If Lunn will read our remarks on the roping (*A.J.* 61., 504-5; 70. 30 and 34-5) he will see that we agree that Croz was not blameless in the matter, nor can Hudson, Douglas or Whymper be wholly excused of varying degrees of blame. But Old Peter was the main offender.

(b) 'Vile insinuation' is an extravagance of Smythe's. Whymper, in *Scrambles*, said the use of the weak rope had an ugly look. He rebutted (better than anyone else has done) the charge of the rope being cut; he paid a handsome tribute to Old Peter for his bearing at the moment of the accident; but it was not Whymper's fault if the use of the sashline looked ugly, as it should never and need never have been used at all. This is a simple statement of fact. We reaffirm what we have already said (*A.J.* 71. 124-5) on this point, and would add that the phrase 'ugly look' must be read in context with the rest of Whymper's comments on the accident.

(c) As regards the reactions of Whymper and the two Taugwalders after the accident, and Whymper's conversations with the Cowells, we think too little is known on the latter subject for it to be wise for anyone to pronounce upon it. What the Cowells said that Whymper said that the

Taugwalders said—is this proper evidence to be used either way? Whympers himself published nothing on the point involved, in his letters to von Fellenberg, to the C.A.I., to *The Times*, or in any edition of *Scrambles* published in his lifetime. We reiterate our former view; that in the stress and strain of the reaction to this appalling accident, it was only likely that the survivors might say more than they meant, and that (on account of language difficulties) what was said would be liable to misunderstandings.

(d) Graham Brown's opinion (which Lunn seems to accept unquestioningly) that Whympers made an unfair attack on Hudson later in life, by blaming him for taking Hadow on the climb, does not impress us. It seems to be completely outweighed by the opinions expressed about Hadow by Hort, T. S. Kennedy, Yeats-Brown, Old Taugwalder, Mrs. Birkbeck, and others. Naturally, at the time, and out of regard for Mrs. Hudson's feelings, the point was not laboured, and even the little said by Whympers in *The Times* was thought by Hadow's father to be too much (*A.J.* 70. 18). But that Hudson was too easy-going in the way he invited people to join him on the Matterhorn seems beyond dispute (see *A.J.* 61. 486-7).

(e) As regards Whympers's review of Mummery's book; the observations made by one of us in *A.J.* 57. 339-40 seem just and should have made it clear that we concur in thinking Whympers's comments reflect no credit on him. But as the aim of our article was to draw attention to errors and false insinuations that Lunn has repeatedly published concerning Whympers, there was no necessity to single out some particular point on which we were in agreement with him. We have made no claims for Whympers being a specially agreeable individual—if anything, our pp. 129, 130 indicate otherwise. He was a man of contrasting qualities.¹

As against Mummery, Whympers seems to be in the wrong; as against the Taugwalders, he seems to have been essentially right. Young Peter soon lived down any reproaches; Old Peter did not, as he easily might have done had he tried. Then, he might have made the Matterhorn incident the basis for a good future climbing career.—D.F.O.D.—T.S.B.]

¹ Lunn might find it of interest to read a study of Whympers that appears to have escaped notice; Coulson Kernahan's *In Good Company* (2nd edn., 1917), pp. 149-188. Kernahan had no mountaineering axes to grind, but he knew Whympers well, having lived quite near him at Southend for about a dozen years.