

## THE PARKERS AND THE MATTERHORN

BY D. F. O. DANGAR

THE brothers Alfred, Charles, and Sandbach Parker are known in Alpine history not only for the series of guideless expeditions they carried out in the 1860's,<sup>1</sup> but also because they were the first to realise that the ascent of the Matterhorn from Zermatt was a feasible undertaking and were the first to make an attempt on the mountain from the Swiss side. The brothers made two attempts from Zermatt, in July, 1860, and July, 1861. Farrar regarded these attempts on the East face, made without guides, as 'among the most remarkable expeditions of the time',<sup>2</sup> but no account of them was published by the Parkers. All that was known about them was derived from the brief summaries given by Whymper in *Scrambles*.

Great as was the achievement in those days of attacking the Matterhorn without guides, Farrar may, perhaps, have attached undue importance to the exploits of the Parkers on the mountain. The Hörnli hut, situated at a height of 3,260 m. = 10,696 ft., at the foot of the Zermatt ridge, may be taken as the starting point of the climb. In their 1860 attempt the Parkers reached a height of c. 11,500 ft. and in 1861 they got a little higher, to about 11,700 ft. according to Whymper, or about 1,000 ft. up the mountain. It may be worth recalling that on the first ascent Whymper's camp was pitched at 11,000 ft. and that up to that point the climbing had been so easy that he and his companions were able to 'run about'.<sup>3</sup> On the next day his party had reached 12,800 ft.—or more than 1,000 ft. above the highest point attained by the Parkers—at 6.20 a.m. and had met no difficulties whatever.

We are greatly indebted to Mrs. Guy Chichester, daughter of Alfred Parker, for permission to publish the two letters printed below. The first of these, dated July 12, 1861, describes the Parkers' second attempt on the Matterhorn and is of considerable historical interest as being the only first-hand account of either attempt to be published. Charles Parker has nothing to say about the difficulties encountered, nor is any reason given for breaking off the ascent. According to Whymper, one of the brothers said—'in neither case did we go as

<sup>1</sup> Letters from two of the brothers to their relatives describing these expeditions were printed in *A. J.* 30. 25 and 159.

<sup>2</sup> *A. J.* 30. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Scrambles*, 1st edition, p. 386. Whymper's italics.

high as we could. At the point where we turned we saw our way for a few hundred feet further; but beyond that the difficulties seemed to increase'.

Whymper wrote that he was informed that both attempts were to be considered as excursions undertaken with a view of ascertaining whether there was any encouragement to make a more deliberate attack on the north-east side. The impression thus conveyed, that the expeditions were reconnaissances rather than attempts, is not supported by the letter from Alfred to Charles, quoted by Farrar in *A. J.* 32. 22—'You must understand once for all that the main object of our expedition is the Matterhorn . . . a steady prowl round the base of the M. until we "see and feel our way" to the top.'

The letter below unfortunately gives no indication whether or not the brothers, as a result of their attempts, were still of the opinion that the mountain could be climbed from Zermatt. It is perhaps significant that they were proposing to pay a visit to the 'back of the Matterhorn' and did not make another attempt from either side. Mrs. Chichester informs me, however, that they had intended to try again in 1865 but hearing of the accident changed their plans.

The opening lines of the second letter from Charles Parker, which is incomplete and unsigned, mention Mr. Hawker's letter; this refers to a letter to *The Times* from the Rev. W. H. Hawker and reprinted in *A. J.* 2.223 describing a fatal accident on the Titlis in August, 1865, in which Herr Hüpner of Dresden and his guide, Eugen Imfanger, lost their lives.

Charles Parker evidently met Peter Taugwalder very soon after the Matterhorn accident; he and his brothers reached Zermatt by way of the Triftjoch on July 29, 1865. Whymper and the Taugwalders were already accusing each other of behaving ill but it is difficult to know what Taugwalder meant by his complaint that Whymper behaved ill in the colouring that he gave to his evidence at Zermatt. This presumably refers to the enquiry into the accident held at Zermatt on July 21, 1865. A report of the proceedings is in *A. J.* 33. 234 sqq. and nothing is to be found in Whymper's evidence, as quoted, that can be regarded as detrimental to Taugwalder.

Taugwalder's statement that he saved Whymper's life, as it was certain that had he not held firm Whymper would have fallen with him, is open to doubt and is very different to his evidence at the inquiry. On being asked whether, if the rope had not broken, he would have been able to save the tourists, he replied that he was firmly convinced that if the rope between Douglas and himself had not broken, he would have been able with the assistance of Croz to save those who fell. Croz, however, having been knocked off his feet, was in no position to help, but Whymper and Old Taugwalder were well placed and it is

possible that they could have held the other four had the rope not broken.<sup>4</sup>

Taugwalder's remark that he had been *promised* a much larger sum than he in fact received cannot be checked. He and his son had been engaged by Douglas and not by Whymper<sup>5</sup> and the figures mentioned by Mr. Parker do not agree with those entered in Whymper's diary and quoted by Professor Graham Brown in *A. J.* 63. 255, where Old Peter is said to have received Fr. 100 and his son 80, with a *bonne-main* of 20.

## I

H. Monte Rosa, Zermatt.

12 July 1861.

MY DEAR MARGARET,

I am writing somewhat under difficulties at a side table in the Salle à manger, en attendant la table d'hôte, which is not till seven—but I may as well begin a letter to you.

I told Mother that S. and A. [Sandbach and Alfred Parker] arrived here yesterday. Their professed object was not to go home without looking well at the Matterhorn, having talked so much about it at home. So this morning we set off to look at the old side, the side next this. We were to be called at 2½ a.m. and Burra, who is not very keen about such excursions, felt so little rested that he excused himself from coming. S. and A. who had walked up from Stalden the day before were loathe to leave their beds but did so, and we were off about 3.50 as there were the usual late calling and delays. We went up by the same route as last year, only passing to right instead of left of the Hörnli. We were well on our way in high Alpine pastures before the sun rose, and after a good scramble up the side of the Hörnli, which rather tired S. and A. we took our breakfast at eight under the same rock where we breakfasted last year, near the top of the couloir by which we had then gained the ridge which connects the Hörnli with the Matterhorn. Our rock is just under the Horn, you can see up to the very top of him from it, and he is so much foreshortened in height that it seems as if a great part would have been done if we got up the first steep snowy ridge and then another piece of rock. We went up just as last year only that I went first most of the way, being least tired, and we changed when we came to the corner where I cut steps last year, and Alfred cut them with the new ice axe. There was much more snow than last year,

<sup>4</sup> The point has been discussed at some length in *A. J.* 61. 497–8, notes 21 and 22. While the Americans were descending K2 after their 1953 attempt, one man—Peter Schoening—with the aid of a strong belay held *five* men who had been pulled off an ice-slope.

<sup>5</sup> *Scrambles*, p. 401, footnote.

which on the whole made it easier I think, but both S. and A. prefer to see their footing on rock and went more gingerly than last year. For a long way we were on a ridge of snow beautifully curled up to an edge by the wind and with thin wafery frozen snow on the top, which was carried away in large flakes by the wind as we disturbed it. The views were magnificent, the whole panorama as usual, and bad weather struggling to come over the Théodule Pass. It was so cloudy there that guides who started with a party for the top of the pass refused to take them on there. But the great Matterhorn seemed to battle with the storm and keep it back from us. Now and then a cloud would force its way past him, pelt us with hail or penetrate us with cold, but soon it was sunshine again. M. Rosa was alternately in cloud and in sunshine. We worked on a little past our old place, but not more than I expected which was always little. After three hours on the Matterhorn himself we turned back from him and descended rapidly by glissades to the level below snow. Our day was diversified by seeing a fine chamois scamper over the ice and leap crevasses, by a marmot hunt, and stoning at ptarmigans which however were not hit. Also by the extraordinary freaks of the clouds, which were being whirled round and round the peak of the Matterhorn in the most curious manner.

S. was so much knocked up by the day's work that he applied for a cup of Mother's tea. This, with a sleep, made him ready for table d'hôte (which has been a parenthesis in my letter) but he did not sit dinner out. I fancy it was only the hard work after a change of diet to Hotel Byron fare that made him and Alfred uncomfortable. A. is quite well now, but I fear neither of them is up to the fatigue of climbing M. Rosa which is my particular desire. I suppose we shall have 'a quiet day' tomorrow and Sunday of course also, and go to the back of the Matterhorn on Monday. I fear we shall achieve little this year, owing to weather and breakdown in health or training. If we were on the Riffel, I should try to get up a M. Rosa party for tomorrow, but as the night is not absolutely fine, I think it is no use attempting it from Zermatt. It must be for another year, I hope. . . .

Your affectionate brother,

C. S. PARKER.

## II

3 October, 1865

MY DEAR FATHER,

I have read Mr. Hawker's letter and remembered your having met him. It is a very clear account, and (with Margt.) I am not sorry that I was too busy to prepare——'s letter for the *Times*, tho' in default of Hawker it wd. I am sure have been interesting.

Several things in the account came home to me, the break in the weather, the being two in number, and the character of the glacier, with an increasing slope as you descend. If you remember, where I had most work to cut a staircase, the ice was what I called bulging, so that after descending twenty or thirty steps I was not visible to Gladstone who waited above. But there was one great difference viz., that there was no perpendicular fall at the bottom of our slope had we slipped, though of course we took every security agt. slipping, it wd. have been more like poor Birkbeck's fall on M. Blanc, & on a very small scale as compared with his, so that for danger of serious accident I am not sure that you, on the steep snow-slopes so near the scene of poor Mr. Hoppner's fall, were not much more exposed to it than we were.

Pray put me down for 25 fr. for poor Imfanger's family. I will mention it to anyone I meet who is likely to take an interest. You might ask Alfred whether he thinks the Club wd. do anything. They wd., I suppose, at least post a notice in their room that subscriptions wd. be received there. Nothing I am afraid—such is the weakness of human benevolence—stops more subscriptions than some little difficulty about paying them at the moment when feeling prompts it.

Am curious to hear what passed when Margt. & Sandbach met Whymper. If I had known they were to meet him I sd. have asked Sandbach to try to make out the truth about Peter Taugwalder. I am under engagement to write to him, and am waiting to try to pick up something more. Of course nothing is easier than to tell him in writing, what he was not content to be told when I saw him, that there is no sort of truth in the belief (wh. at Zermatt is universal) that a money-reward was to be given for the first ascent of the Matterhorn.

But what I wanted also to ascertain for him is whether he had better make up his mind at once that the payment he recd. is final & cannot be reconsidered.

I want to ascertain this without letting it be mentioned in such a way as to give me the appearance of a meddler. It is very possible that the payment was just what was right under the circumstances. But all I yet know is this, that Whymper and Taugwalder very possibly misunderstood each other, at any rate each is aggrieved at the other.

Whymper says Taugwalder behaved ill, imperilled Whymper's life and was greedy about pay. Taugwalder says Whymper behaved ill, especially in the colouring he gave to his evidence at Zermatt wh. has damaged Taugwalder, that *he saved Whymper's life*, as it is certain if he had not held on that Whymper being tied to him by a strong rope must have fallen with him. He and his son were also the only guides in descending, & one cant expect guides to admit that he wd have got down alone, much less that he took them down as he wd have us believe. Taugwalder is a very good cragsman & Whymper is said to be a bad one.

And as regards the payment Taugwalder says that he was *promised* a much larger sum, that he wd. never have run so much risk for the payment he recd. (120 francs, and his son 80), and that he has had no opportunity of being heard on this matter by anyone but Whymper, who had quarrelled with him.

I thought I cd. hardly refuse his request to make some inquiry for him in England. Perhaps the best way wd. be for me to see Whymper—casually, if I can. But if I had known Sandbach was to meet him, I wd. have asked him to make out how the land lay. Will you show him this, wh. I fear may only bother you, and ask him if anything he heard throws light on the matter. Dont let it be talked about so as to come round to Whymper . . .