

A Matterhorn railway

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A MATTERHORN RAILWAY.

(The controversy about a Matterhorn railway is still acute. We reproduce herewith an article which was published in "THE FIELD" on July 21st by the courtesy of the Editor.)

Soon after Edward Whymper had gained his tragic victory over the Matterhorn in 1865 he wrote: "Others will essay to scale its proud cliffs . . . others may tread its summit snows." He had in mind, no doubt, mountaineers like himself, who would follow in his footsteps up the great peak with rope and ice-axe.

His prophecy was soon to be fulfilled; and since those early days many hundreds of climbers have stood on the Swiss or Italian summits — for the mountain is divided between the two countries — after struggling up one of its four fine ridges. Two of these arêtes, the Hörnli and the Italian, have long since been tamed by ropes and chains. Even so, the climber who reaches the top must be fit and active; and the Matterhorn can still strike back dramatically with its armoury of sudden storms, cold winds and stone avalanches, as many of the tombstones in the tiny Zermatt graveyard testify.

But this is in fair fight. And little did Whymper imagine when he wrote these words that twice within 100 years "the most noble cliff in Europe", as Ruskin called it, would be threatened with defilement by a funicular or a railway. Britons have a long-standing and peculiar interest in the Alps. Britons pioneered and taught to others the exercise in courage, stamina and craft which constitutes mountaineering. Such an outrage in the Alps would therefore cause disgust and indignation here.

The first of these projects was put forward in the early years of the present century. The idea then was for a funicular to be constructed up the great mountain rising 8,000ft. in three stages, starting from the village of Zermatt at its feet. A concession for the scheme was actually granted. But in 1907 popular outcry culminated in a petition from far and wide against such vandalism, which caused the Swiss Federal Government to withdraw its sanction. And the Matterhorn was reprieved.

On the present occasion the threat comes from Italy; a threat which would have deeply grieved the celebrated Italian poet and alpinist, Guido Rey, who spent a great part of his life in the Valtournanche in sight of his beloved Cervino.

It was he who wrote of it "I think that few Alpine peaks can create so sublime, so stern an impression as this one does; at certain hours, at sunrise or at sunset, when the walls of the valley which frame it are sunk in shadow, and the whole Pyramid is wrapped about with light and seems to shine in glory. At such times we have before our eyes no reality but an apparition . . ." That man should mar such beauty would indeed be a crime against nature.

The proposal is as follows; the cable railway for skiers which now runs from the village of Brenil — once the home of the guide Jean Jacques Carrel, the first conqueror of the Italian ridge — to the Furggrat (10,000ft.), at the foot of the South-Eastern ridge of the mountain, would be extended. From the Furggrat, cables would be built to the Italian summit (14,705ft.), passing just south of the jagged Furggen ridge.

To make the scheme more plausible it has been suggested that the railway should be combined at the summit with a radio beacon for the safety of aircraft. But it seems doubtful whether this beacon is really necessary; and should it later prove to be so, there are higher and more suitable mountains in the district which would be accessible in winter. This the Matterhorn most certainly is not.

Another consideration would be the effect of altitude on the untrained tourists, who would be transported from a height of 6,000ft. to nearly 15,000ft. in a comparatively short space of time. Many of them would probably suffer from a severe form of mountain sickness, as such cases are not unknown on lower mountain railways already in use.

Again, for those who are not fit to walk or climb or do not wish to do so, a funicular railway has been in use for many years which runs to the top of the Gornergrat, over 10,000ft. high. This is situated only a few miles from the Matterhorn, and lying as it does in the midst of a circle of great peaks, provides one of the finest alpine views in Europe. But the real point at issue is whether a wholly unjustifiable affront against good taste is to be permitted.

The President of the Alpine Club, supported by four ex-Presidents, and numerous other Alpine Clubs (including the Italian) and societies all over the world have written condemning most strongly this proposed outrage on the Matterhorn.

So let us hope that the noble sentiments expressed during the previous threat will again prevail. The high summits of the Alps are the property of the whole people and a symbol of liberty. They are not for sale.

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