

Newsletter

MATTERHORN 2015

Post 11 — Monday July 31st 1865
from Zermatt

Something strange is going on

150 Years Ago — First Ascent of the Matterhorn

It is Summer 1865

And how many un-climbed Alpine peaks will have been conquered by the time the cool damp air of Autumn returns?

Mountaineers, many of them British, are planning their routes and engaging their favourite local guides to assist. So I, whose scribblings usually cover London society events and gossip, have packed my notebooks and pens with my climbing ropes and nailed boots. I will follow those intrepid climbers,

witness their achievements and post back my reports. Many of the summits of Europe have been conquered over the last fifty years, those left must rank as among the most challenging. Grandes Jorasses, Aiguille Verte, Matterhorn – who will be the first to set foot on your proud peaks?



The Story So Far

The Official Enquiry into the tragedy that followed the first ascent of the Matterhorn took two days to reach a verdict. No details have been released but it was established that an accident occurred after Douglas Hadow lost

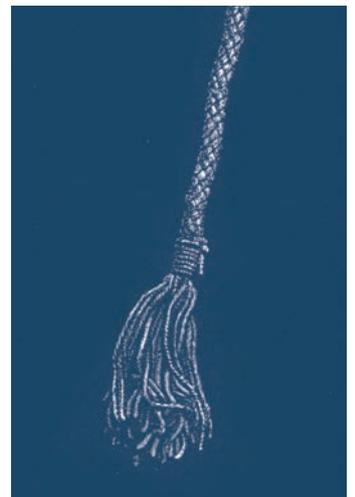
his footing, slipped, and the rope that tied him to Michel Croz, Charles Hudson and Lord Francis Douglas pulled them all to their deaths. Mr Whymper has been allowed to return home.

Something strange is going on

Through my contacts I managed a glance at the transcripts of the court sessions, but now it seems those documents are hidden away as if they did not exist. Mr Whymper was most upset when Herr Clemenz, the presiding Judge, reneged on his promise to supply to him the answers that Peter Taugwalder gave. I fear I must take care not to be too public about my privileged information, but would say that I find the evidence most frustrating. Possibly Herr Clemenz was trying to be kind to Taugwalder by not pursuing the issue of the choice of rope, but I feel these ugly rumours would have been more easily squashed if clarification had been obtained and published.

Old Peter's Choice of Rope

I was talking to some locals about what Peter Taugwalder said about the rope. It seems that the word I understood in English as "special" might have been the word they use in their dialect meaning simply "another". Even so, my conclusion is that Taugwalder believed the rope he used to be sufficiently strong, and there is no reason to think



The Rope that Broke

otherwise. I find it unlikely that Old Peter maliciously used a weaker rope between himself and Lord Francis Douglas from the fact that they enjoyed an excursion together on the Gabelhorn only a fortnight ago. Would he condemn to death so excellent a client? And the party had with them copious amounts of rope. Even if the men in front had used up one length, he still had a choice of types of rope. But he called this rope "special". Here's a theory –

Last Monday, the Marquess Queensberry, brother of Lord Francis, arrived in town.

While sorting through his lost sibling's affairs, he found an article Lord Francis had penned about the Gabelhorn ascent with Taugwalder. It almost ended in tragedy when the cornice on the peak broke. They would both have tumbled to their deaths but were saved by the rope that tied them to the other guide, Viannin from Zinal. It is highly possible that this was the same sort of rope as that which broke on the Matterhorn. If such a rope had so recently saved his life, it is hardly surprising that Old Peter would consider it "special".



Leaving Zermatt and reaching the town of Visp



Kennington Road near Whymper's home in Lambeth

Jean Baptiste Croz is lamenting loudly the loss of his brave brother.

Inconsolable Grief

Lord Francis' brother is quite deranged in his sorrow and we fear for his safety. On Friday last he went missing. Mr McCormick organised a search which found the Marquess high up on the Hörnli, hysterical and calling to his brother as if to find him

still alive on some rocky ledge. All night he roamed and it is miraculous he had not met his own death on the unforgiving mountain.

Also bewitched by grief is Jean Baptiste Croz, who has been here to collect the belongings of Michel. He is lamenting loudly the loss of his brave brother and the

The furore has reached London.

impact this will have on the whole family. He returned yesterday to Chamonix, and I fear that the rest of that town will pick quickly up on the accusations being made against the Taugwalders. This will do nothing for the tension already manifest between the inhabitants of these mountain towns.

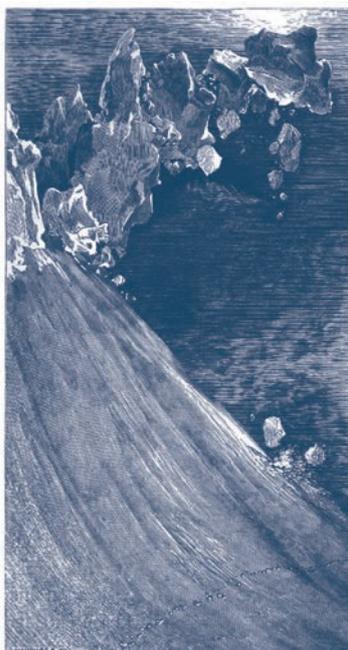
Debate among our Alpine Club members focuses on the mountaineering mistakes

that brought about the slip, and Mr Whymper's reticence to say anything further is allowing much imaginative conjecture.

The Leader in The Times has argued stridently how such adventures in the mountains result in such tragic waste of lives. A public thrilled by the spectacle of violent death – especially I might venture when it involves a member of an aristocratic family and a respected clergyman – is joining in.

I have no heart anymore to remain in these mountains

But having been so close to such tragic events, I shall keep an open ear for information that will fill the gaps. Surely the Report of the Enquiry will be published soon and properly studied, or some other evidence come to light. It is my suspicion that what happened on the Matterhorn in July 1865 will continue to be debated for many years to come. ■



Venture onto a snow cornice on the top of the mountain and there is a good chance it might break beneath you



Experience the 1st Ascent of the Matterhorn "live" on the web.

Imprint

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