



## 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 bodies of three of the four men who fell to their deaths while descending the Matterhorn were brought back to Zermatt for burial. The remains of Lord Francis Douglas have not been found. Edward Whymper has been

persuaded that a letter to The Times was essential to quell the rumours that are spreading like wildfire but he was careful in his explanation to spare the feelings of the relatives of the deceased.



The search party crosses the glacier

## An Official Enquiry opened on Friday afternoon

**A**lready it is over. A cloak of secrecy seems to have been draped over the proceedings and the verdict. That the tragedy was the product of a sorry accident for which no one can be held responsible seems to be deemed all that anyone needs to know. The Presiding Judge, Herr Clemenzenz, is also the owner of the Hotel Mont Cervin, and the motivation to close the episode so not discourage tourists might be supposed to be strong.

The Enquiry supplied Mr Whymper with a list of questions in advance. I'm not sure if this is usual Swiss practice, but it surprised me! Even more curiously, Mr Whymper was also asked to prepare questions to be put to Old Peter Taugwalder. The only other witnesses called were guides Franz Andenmatten



Young Peter Taugwalder

from Almagell and Alexander Lochmatter from St. Niklaus. Both had accompanied Mr Whymper on the day they found the bodies and buried them in the snow. Young Peter Taugwalder has already been given leave to depart Zermatt, as he had an engagement in Chamonix. Of course, what went on behind closed doors can only be guessed at, but I have glimpsed the records and they show little deviation from the questions and answers submitted in advance.

## Secrecy igniting Supposition

Talk can be inventive. Most popular is the story that involves the rope not breaking at all, but being maliciously cut. Some claim the perpetrator of the crime to have been Old Peter Taugwalder and others Edward Whymper. The efforts to fit the evidence to each theory would be almost amusing, were not the implications so serious. There is no suggestion from either of the accused that they consider the other to be a murderer. I do detect some tension on the part of Mr Whymper towards the Taugwalders, but he assures me that this is nothing to do with the cause of the accident.

## Why was a particular rope, it being weaker than the others, deployed?

There is an issue, I believe, of far more significance than gossip about axes or knives. Why was a particular rope, it being weaker than the others, deployed between Old Peter and Lord Francis Douglas? Mr Whymper told me that the lesser rope was intended to be used as a fixed line to protect the difficult part of the descent. Why that was not carried out he cannot say. It sounds to me that the the exhilaration of the moment played a role in such carelessness.

Mr Whymper said he designed some questions that would give Peter Taugwalder a chance to explain, and so to exonerate himself from



The night he spent with Croz, swapping stories round a camp-fire, will stay forever in Edward Whymper's memory. On July 14th he lost not only his favourite guide, but a good friend

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slandrous speculation. From what I have seen of the records, Old Peter replied that he tied himself to Lord Francis with a "special" rope but he was never asked what was special. He is a man of few words and would not elaborate his answer unless requested.



The Matterhorn and the Riffelhorn. In the past week, both mountains have taken mens' lives.

How much I wish I could question him further. But the poor chap has withdrawn, hardly surprising with the sort of whisperings that flutter round town.

## Mr Whymper was finally allowed to leave on Saturday afternoon

Before his departure, he paid off the Taugwalders for the climb, settled Lord Francis Douglas' outstanding bill at the Mont Cervin and left money with Mr Adams Reilly to give to the family of Michel Croz.

## Edward Whymper's inner turmoil is evident.

He has conducted himself with dignity, but the inner turmoil is evident. He is still so very young, but looks like a man who has been forced seriously to re-evaluate himself and, having looked closely at the terrible face of death, his whole approach to life from now on. ■



Old Peter Taugwalder

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### Imprint

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