

# The Tragedy that stirred Europe

Autor(en): **Cupelin, Reginald**

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## THE TRAGEDY THAT STIRRED EUROPE.

By REGINALD CUPELIN.

As thousands of men and women climb mountains of their own or other countries during the summer there will be much talk about joys and dangers of mountaineering, which now claims clubs all over the world.

When dangers are discussed, conversation will inevitably drift to the subject of Whymper and the Matterhorn and the most famous mountaineering disaster of all time.

More than threequarters of a century after it occurred, aspects are still coming to light of the full story of that tragedy — a tragedy that stirred Europe, caused Queen Victoria to ask the Lord Chamberlain if mountaineering could be lawfully banned, and brought forth the thundering "leader" on mountaineering in *The Times*, which demanded: "Is it life? Is it duty? Is it commonsense? Is it allowable? Is it not wrong?"

In 1865, Edward Whymper, a young London engraver, had made seven unsuccessful attempts to climb the Matterhorn, that giant obelisk which rises above Zermatt and the summit of which lies on the Swiss-Italian frontier.

On July 14th, Whymper at last climbed the mountain from Zermatt; simultaneously, an Italian party, led by one of Whymper's former guides, Jean Antoine Carrel, failed to climb the peak from the Italian side. Whymper's victory was short-lived.

During the descent the youngest member of the party, a youth named Hadow, slipped, shot off into space and dragged with him two of the other amateurs in the party — the Rev. Charles Hudson and Lord Francis Douglas — and one of the guides, Michel Croz.

There were three others in the party, Whymper and two Zermatt guides named Taugwalder, who were father and son.

The rope broke between the four falling men and the remaining three; and Whymper and the Taugwalders were left clinging to the rocks, watching their companions sliding to death over a precipice thousands of feet high.

There were two immediate public reactions to the accident. One was the declaration that mountaineering was a very rash business, this view arising from the fact that the general public then knew little about the sport.

The other reaction was a scurrilous campaign carried out on the Continent by sensational newspapers alleging that Whymper had "cut the rope." They did not explain how he could have done so in the circumstances, even had he wished to.

These stories, seen to be without foundation by all who considered the facts, gradually died down.

Certain points were commented on during the following years, however. One was that Whymper gave up serious mountaineering in the Alps immediately after the accident. The report of the interrogation of the Taugwalders, carried out as a matter of course by the Swiss authorities just after the accident, was kept secret until 1920, eight years after Whymper's death.

Most curious thing of all was that the rope linking Lord Alfred Douglas with elder Taugwalder — the rope that broke — was the weakest of three used by the party.

Many of the Zermatt guides accused Taugwalder of responsibility for the accident, though in what was never clearly indicated. It was felt by many members of the climbing fraternity that Whymper had not told all he knew about the accident. The danger of creating an "international incident" was generally accepted as most likely reason for his reticence.

For more than 80 years men who climb mountains have talked of the Matterhorn disaster, even after the mountain lost much of its old terror and was being climbed by dozens of people every day in the summer.

Three films were made about the accident, books were written around it, but when Edward Whymper died in 1912 it seemed unlikely that any further light would ever be shed on the disaster.

Then, in 1932, Lord Conway of Allington, one of the great climbers of the later Victorian age and a man who had known Whymper well, published his autobiography, "Episodes in a Varied Life," a book which began the Matterhorn argument over again.

For in it Lord Conway said of Whymper: "He always told the story in exactly the same words, whether in his letter to *The Times*, in his lectures and his book. That story was very carefully written and revised.

"The late Dr. G. F. Browne, once Bishop of Bristol, who in his turn became President of the Alpine Club, told me not many years ago that he was the only living man who knew the truth about the accident and that the knowledge would perish with him, as it has perished" — Bishop Browne having died in 1930.

"It appears that he was at Zermatt at the time of the accident," Lord Conway said. "Whymper came to him for advice as to how much of the story he should tell."

So here, nearly 70 years after the accident, was the first authoritative statement that the full story had not appeared in the published records.

But Conway went further. After suggestion that two or three strands of the rope might have been severed beforehand without anyone's knowledge, he added: "The end of the rope engraved in 'Scrambles' (Whymper's 'Scrambles in the Alps') is not the one

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where the breakage occurred. It is the right rope, but not the broken end."

So Conway, it appears, believed that one of the Taugwalders had in fact tampered with the rope.

Now, in a book published in Switzerland and written by Charles Gos, the well-known Alpine historian, there has appeared yet another footnote to the Matterhorn disaster.

Gos says that, shortly before he died, Whymper went to the Rev. W. A. B. Coolidge, the Oxford don who became the greatest Alpine historian of all time, and told him the full story of the accident. When such a meeting took place — if it ever took place — we do not know.

But anyone who follows up the story of the Matterhorn disaster will find a curious letter sent by Whymper to Coolidge as early as 1883.

That letter is in Switzerland and, so far as I know, has never been published. It is interesting for it holds a number of implications which might solve some of the queer questions that the Matterhorn disaster still raises.

"Many thanks for your frank and manly letter," Whymper wrote. "It has grieved me much to think how gravely I must have been misunderstood by you whom I always respected and have grown to look upon with a warm feeling of regard.

"My trouble now is the thought of the pain it must have cost you to write to me on the subject. Let me remove the sting of it at once by saying that as I never had the least mistrust in you and was wholly ignorant of your mistrust in me I heartily rejoice that this mistake has been rectified and earnestly hope that ours may be a life of friendship."

Coolidge was then editor of "The Alpine Journal", and it seems that he may have learned the full story of the broken rope, possibly from his acquaintances at Zermatt, possibly from Bishop Browne.

It would probably have appeared to him that Whymper had been gravely negligent and he may have written, in his blunt way, to ask what Whymper's position was. Whymper evidently explained and "the fiery lamb," as Coolidge was sometimes called, was forced to reply in his "frank and manly letter."

What seems certain is that the full story of the Matterhorn disaster has not even yet been told.

(*Yorkshire Evening News*.)

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## SWISS BENEVOLENT SOCIETY.

A meeting of the Swiss Benevolent Society was held at 31, Conway Street, W.1, on Monday, 21st August, 1950. The President opened it with the sad announcement of the death of the Society's Vice-President, Mr. F. M. Gamper. Colonel Bon referred to Mr. Gamper's long years of faithful work and invaluable service. The members stood in silence to honour his memory.

The business part of the meeting began with the minutes of the previous meeting. These were followed by the accounts. The Hon. Treasurer, Mr. M. Rothlisberger, pointed out that due to the devaluation of the £ the subsidy from the Swiss Confederation and the Cantons now represented more in sterling. On the other hand the expenditure had increased, and would probably continue to do so on account of the rising prices. Again the S.B.S., in conjunction with the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, had helped in sending children to Switzerland for a few weeks' holidays, and had borne the cost of the tickets where parents were unable to pay. A new item on the expenditure side was the Society's share in the cost of the Welfare Office for Swiss Girls in Great Britain. The President mentioned the outstanding success this office has been so far, and that the Welfare Officer, Miss Wolfer, was dealing with a very large number of problems. In answer to a question the Hon. Treasurer confirmed that the Society derived a considerable income each year from the covenants under which the S.B.S. could claim back from Inland Revenue the income tax paid on individual subscriptions. Most of the first covenants of seven years had matured, and he was pleased to announce that very nearly all these subscribers had signed a new covenant for another seven years.

After the accounts of the Swiss Home had been dealt with Mr. Oertli was elected Vice-President of the Society. He has been one of the most loyal members and has put in a great deal of hard work over many years. Next four new pensioners were chosen, bringing the number on the Society's books to 66.

Before the close of the meeting the Secretary warmly recommended the new book "The Young Traveller in Switzerland" written by Mrs. W. Meier, a member of the Society.

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