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THE CONTEST FOR THE MATTERHORN

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first ascent on 14th July 1865

One of the most exciting chapters in the history of Alpine mountaineering is undoubtedly the history of the first ascent of the highest peaks in Europe. It started on 8th August 1786, when the physician Dr. M. G. Paccard first set foot on the Mont-Blanc (15,863 ft.) with the guide Jacques Balmat and concluded, as far as the mountains over 13,000 ft. were concerned, on 14th July 1865, with the conquest of the Matterhorn by Edward Whymper and his companions.

Let us briefly recapitulate the dates of the most important first ascents in Switzerland: Jungfrau 1811, Finsteraarhorn 1812, Zermatter Breithorn 1813, and Monte Rosa (Zumsteinspitze) 1820. Now follows a pause of twenty-two years: Grosses Lauteraarhorn 1842, Bernina 1852, Dufourspitze 1855, Dom 1859, Weisshorn 1861, Dent Blanche 1862, Dent d'Hérens 1863, Zinalrothorn 1864 and Obergabelhorn 1865. It is interesting to note that all the giants of the Zermatter area were conquered, but its most attractive peak, the Matterhorn (14,774 ft.) had defied every attack until that time.

A mortal combat

Between 1857 and the first ascent on 14th July 1865, no less than eighteen attempts to conquer this, the most superb mountain of all, are recorded. It was in essence a grandiose duel between the Italian mountain guide Jean-Antoine Carrel (1829-1890) from Valtournanche and the Englishman Edward Whymper (1840-1911). Repeatedly they had tried joint or completely independent solutions for this, the most difficult alpine problem. The first two attempts took place in 1857. The first was undertaken by J. A. Carrel with J. J. Carrel (in total four members of the Carrel family took part in the attempts until 1865) and the seminarian Amé Corret from Breuil via the Arrête du Lion to the Tête du Lion (12,285 ft.). The second attempt, made by V. Carrel and G. Maquignaz took the same route but reached only an altitude of 11,385 ft.

It is said that in 1858 or perhaps 1859 the first tourist appeared who expressed interest in a possible ascent of the Matterhorn. It was the Englishman T. S. Kennedy who, after taking a "tour du Cervin" and viewing the mountain from all sides, came to the conclusion that the only way to climb the mountain would probably be from the Italian side. J. A. and J. J. Carrel made the third attempt in 1858 and reached the Grande Tour (12,540 ft.). After making a trip around the base of the Matterhorn, Vaughan Hawkins shared his compatriot Kennedy's opinion regarding the best way to climb the mountain.

A 20-year old Englishman named Whymper

In 1860, the first attempt to climb the Matterhorn from the Swiss side took place. Three Englishmen, the brothers Alfred, Charles and Sandbach Parker, the first "guideless ones" in the area, climbed the Hörnligrat to about 11,880 ft., having started at Zermatt. There they were forced to turn back because of bad weather. A further attack came from Breuil: The English Physicist Prof. John Tyndall and Vaughan Hawkins and the guides J. A. Carrel and J. J. Bennen reached a height of over 13,000 ft. on the Grande Tour, i.e. they reached the base

of the actual summit of the Matterhorn (fifth attempt).

But another tourist appeared that year of 1860 at the foot of the Matterhorn. This mountain was to become his fate. He was the 20-year old Edward Whymper. He had been commissioned by a publishing house to tour the Alps and to make sketches for a travel handbook. Deeply impressed, he viewed the mountain first from Zermatt, then from Breuil.

In July 1861, the brothers Parker returned to Zermatt and again climbed the Hörnligrat without a guide. This time they achieved a height of 12,210 ft. They told Whymper who was also at Zermatt at the time, that a possible "path" could be distinguished which went slightly more than 1,000 ft. higher. After the attempt of J. A. Carrel and J. J. Carrel from the south side (the seventh attempt) in August when they reached the Crête du Coq (13,305 ft.), Whymper too began to enter the competition. His first attempt with a guide from the Bernese Oberland was terminated on the Cheminée at a height of 12,721 ft. Prof Tyndall was in the area again, but had to be satisfied with viewing the mountain from below as his guide refused to attempt an ascent.

Seven attempts to ascend the mountain in the year 1862

The year 1862 represents a record year in respect to the number of attempts to conquer the Matterhorn. The mountain defied no less than an additional seven attempts (the ninth to fifteenth) that year. A new distinguished candidate appears: T. S. Kennedy who had already climbed the Lyskamm in 1860 and the Dent Blanche in 1862 and was the first to succeed in ascending both those peaks. As early as January, without the help of skis or snowshoes, he reached a point 11,220 ft. high on the Hörnligrat. But an icy snowstorm forced him to turn back. July 1862 was high season on the Matterhorn, but only on the Italian side. Curiously enough the Swiss side was considered impossible to climb. First Whymper and Reginald J. S. MacDonald with two guides reached the foot of the Cheminée (12,068 ft); afterwards they reached a height of 13,068 ft. at the foot of the Grande Tour, together with J. A. Carrel and Pession. Then Whymper undertook an audacious solo trip because the guides of both Breuil and Zermatt refuse to accompany him. This time he set a new record by reaching a height of 13,477 ft. beneath the "Necktie" (twelfth attempt). Influenced by his success, J. A. Carrel again joined Whymper, but they only reached barely 13,000 ft. on the Crête du Coq. Again Whymper attempted the ascent, accompanied only by the hunch-backed Porter Luc Meynet, and broke his own record by reaching 13,536 ft. But this record was very short-lived because just a few days later, on 28th July, Professor Tyndall, well equipped with irons and rope ladders, reached the Italian Epaule (14,051 ft.) named "Pic Tyndall" on this occasion. Tyndall was accompanied by four guides including J. A. Carrel who was chief guide.

(To be continued.)

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