

## Landscape Artist Attempts to Climb Matterhorn

by Paul Chrastina

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In the summer of 1860, Edward Whymper visited the Alps for the first time. Whymper was an athletic, twenty-year-old English artist who had been hired by a London publisher to make sketches and engravings of the scenic mountains along the border of Switzerland and Italy.

While sketching and painting his views of the mountains, Whymper decided that he wanted to become the first man to climb the Matterhorn, the third-highest mountain in Europe. One of the most imposing of the Alps' many peaks, the Matterhorn was described by travelers returning to England as "the most noble rock of Europe." The Matterhorn had never been successfully climbed. It had a bad reputation among mountain climbers who grimly referred to it as "that awful mountain."

Whymper made no attempt to climb the Matterhorn in 1860, but he did join a club of English Alpinists, with whom he practiced the sport of mountain climbing. He went home to England for the winter, but returned to the Alps in the summer of 1861, determined to reach the summit of the unconquered Matterhorn. Whymper began his first ascent from the Italian village of Breuil, near the Italian-Swiss border. Along with a Swiss guide, he was making his way up a low ridge that led to the base of the Matterhorn when he encountered an Italian mountaineer named Jean Carrel, who was accompanied by his uncle.

Whymper soon found that Jean Carrel also had ambitions to be the first to reach the peak of the Matterhorn, and had already made several attempts to climb the mountain. Carrel patriotically believed that a native Italian like himself--and not some intrusive young Englishman--should be the first to set foot on the Matterhorn's narrow summit, which lies partly in Italy and partly in Switzerland.

That night, Whymper and his guide camped near Carrel and his uncle on an exposed ridge. As the men tried to get some sleep, bitterly cold winds swept down off the mountain above them. "About midnight," Whymper wrote, "there came from high aloft a tremendous explosion, followed by a second of dead quiet. A great mass of rock had split off and was descending toward us. My guide started up, wrung his hands and exclaimed 'O my God, we are lost!' We heard it coming, mass after mass pouring over the precipices, bounding and rebounding from cliff to cliff, and the great rocks in advance smiting one another." By luck, the men were missed by the oncoming stone avalanche, which rumbled past them and poured down onto the glaciers in the valley below.

The next morning, while Whymper was still asleep, Carrel and his uncle broke camp early and headed up the mountain in an effort to outpace the English climber. At about 7:00 a.m., Whymper and his guide set out in pursuit of the Italians. Tied together by a length of rope, Whymper and the guide scrambled up the steep slopes until they reached a tall slab of rock known as the Chimney. Here, Whymper's guide refused to go any further, despite the Englishman's arguments--and the sounds of the Italian climbers somewhere safely above them. "I told him he was a coward, and he mentioned his opinion of me," Whymper wrote. "The day was perfect; the wind had fallen; the way seemed clear, no

insuperable obstacle was in sight; but what could one do alone?" Frustrated, Whymper retreated from the mountain.

The Carrels, meanwhile, managed to ascend 300 feet above the Chimney before turning back. With winter approaching, Edward Whymper was forced to delay his campaign to conquer the Matterhorn.

He went home to England and to his engraving job until the following summer of 1862, when he returned to the Alps. On his first 1862 attempt to climb the Matterhorn he was turned back by a violent windstorm. During the most intense part of this storm, Whymper wrote, "Advance or return were alike impossible... we saw stones as big as a man's fist blown away horizontally into space. We dared not attempt to stand upright and remained stationary on all fours, glued, as it were, to the rocks."

On another attempt, climbing alone, Whymper succeeded in surmounting the Chimney and ascending to another sheer rock face called the Tower. Gripping the narrow ledges and hairline cracks that crisscrossed the rock, he inched his way up the vertical face "as if crucified, pressing against the rock, and feeling each rise and fall of my chest as I breathed." Finally, he pulled himself over the broad ledge at the top of the Tower. He continued upward for another half hour, scrambling between huge boulders that reminded him of the "gravestones of giants." As the afternoon grew late, Whymper stopped at the edge of a snowfield, 1,000 feet below the mountain's summit, and decided to turn back, confident that he could now reach the top with the help of competent guides. On the way down from his solitary climb, Whymper reached a snow-covered ridge that descended to the Italian village of Breuil. Exhilarated by his achievement of the day, and contemplating dinner, bath and bed in the village, Whymper misstepped and slipped off the steep ridge, hurtling down a steep slope toward the brink of a cliff that dropped 1,000 feet to the surface of a glacier far below. Whymper fell about 200 feet "in seven or eight bounds," before coming to rest only ten feet from the edge of the cliff. Dazed, he pressed a handful of snow to a gash in his head to stop the bleeding. He then fainted, collapsing in the shelter of some large rocks. When he regained consciousness, it was dark, and he groped his way down to the village, where a doctor dressed twenty separate wounds that he had suffered in the fall.

Whymper was soon back on the mountain with a local guide. They worked their way up to a point about 600 feet from the top of the Matterhorn, where the pitch of the mountain's rock walls became too steep and unstable for further ascent. Deciding that he would need more guides and a ladder to ascend any further, Whymper came down from the mountain. He returned to England a few weeks later.

In the summer of 1863, Edward Whymper came back to the unconquered Matterhorn, more determined than ever, he wrote, "to find a way up it or to prove it to be really inaccessible." With him he brought a pair of folding ladders to surmount the vertical cliffs high up on the Italian Ridge. Reasoning that he and Jean Carrel ought to join forces instead of competing, Whymper tried to persuade the Italian mountaineer to work for him as a guide. Carrel agreed, and the two men began climbing the Matterhorn together.

A storm blew in when they were about halfway to the summit, however, and the climbers were pinned down together for twenty-six hours in a small tent; then Carrel persuaded Whymper to give up the attempt and return to the village. Whymper's alliance with Carrel dissolved, and Whymper went home to England. He did not return to the Alps for two years.

Whymper decided to try some new tactics when he renewed his assault on the Matterhorn in June of 1865. Although he had come within 600 feet of the summit by way of the Italian Ridge, he now decided to attack the Matterhorn from a new direction, by climbing partway up its south face, where a broad natural gully sloped upward one thousand feet before joining another ridge that led to the summit.

On the morning of June 21, Whymper set out on this new route with three Swiss guides. At about ten o'clock in the morning, the group stopped for lunch in the gully, about halfway up to the ridge. Whymper later wrote "Almer [one of the guides] was seated on a rock, carving large slices from a leg of mutton, the others were chatting, and the first intimation we had of danger was from a sudden roar, which reverberated awfully amongst the cliffs; and looking up we saw masses of rocks, boulders and stones, big and little, dart round the corner eight hundred feet or so above us." As the avalanche plummeted toward the climbers, Whymper wrote, "The precious mutton was pitched on one side, the winebag was let fall" while the four men quickly sought shelter behind defending rocks, "endeavoring to make ourselves as small as possible." Shaken but unhurt, the group retreated from the gully, which had been carved by frequent avalanches similar to the one that had just passed by them. Whymper's seventh attempt to conquer the Matterhorn had failed.

As his guides left him to fulfill "previous engagements," he climbed several other nearby mountains in Switzerland, but returned to Breuil a month later, on July 7, 1865. Jean Carrel, meanwhile, was making his own plans to conquer the Matterhorn, under the auspices of the newly formed Italian Alpine Club. The club's leader, Felice Giordano, had hired Carrel to make the ascent before Whymper could succeed. Hearing of Whymper's arrival in Breuil, Giordano quickly sent a letter summoning the men who were to accompany Carrel. "I have tried to keep everything secret," he wrote, "but that fellow whose life seems to depend on the Matterhorn is here, suspiciously prying into everything. I have taken all the best men away from him; and yet he is so enamored of the mountain that he may go with others...He is here in the hotel and I try to avoid speaking to him."

Whymper found Carrel and tried to hire him for another climb, but the guide claimed that he had already made other plans and declined. Finding that no one else in the village was willing to accompany him, Whymper finally learned of the Italian's plan to climb the mountain before Whymper could do it. Feeling "bamboozled," Whymper desperately hiked ten miles to the village of Zermatt, on the Swiss side of the mountain, in search of guides.

In Zermatt, Whymper chanced to meet two other climbing parties who were also intending to climb the Matterhorn, and he persuaded them to combine into one large party. The other climbers were: Lord Francis Douglas, a nineteen year-old mountaineer; the Reverend Charles Hudson and his traveling companion,

Douglas Hadow; Michael Croz, a Swiss guide; and two other Swiss guides, a father and son, both named Peter Taugwalder.

At half past five on the morning of July 13, 1865, Whymper and his party left the village of Zermatt. Six hours later they reached the base of the mountain. As they began climbing up the Zermatt Ridge of the Matterhorn, Whymper was keenly aware that Jean Carrel and six other Italian climbers were simultaneously working their way up the Italian Ridge on the other side of the mountain.

After his many failed attempts on the treacherous Italian Ridge, Whymper was surprised and delighted at the ease with which the Zermatt Ridge could be climbed. "We were now fairly upon the mountain," he wrote, "and were astonished to find that places which... looked entirely impracticable, were so easy that we could run about.... The whole of this great slope was now revealed, rising for 3,000 feet like a huge natural staircase."

After camping overnight partway up the Matterhorn, Whymper and his companions climbed swiftly the next morning to within 300 feet of the summit, where a difficult section of steep rock forced them to leave the ridge and traverse across the north face of the mountain. Young Douglas Hadow began to have difficulties at this point, and was helped by the others. Cautiously, the men advanced across the rock wall. Scrambling upward to regain the ridge, the climbers were thrilled to see that "The Matterhorn was ours! Nothing but two hundred feet of easy snow remained to be surmounted!" Whymper and Croz raced for the summit, reaching it together. From the snow-covered peak, the two men looked down the opposite side of the Matterhorn and saw Carrel's team nearly 1,200 feet below, still laboring up the far more difficult slopes of the Italian Ridge. Whymper and Croz shouted themselves hoarse and waved their arms to attract Carrel's attention, but went unseen. Finally, heady with triumph, Whymper wrote, "We drove our sticks in, and prized away the crags... soon a torrent of stones poured down from the cliffs. There was no doubt about it this time. The Italians turned and fled." When the rest of the party reached the peak, Michael Croz produced a tent pole from his rucksack and planted it in the snow, tying his shirt to it as a makeshift pennant. The party built a cairn of rocks to commemorate their victory, and spent an hour on the summit, delirious with their success.

Then they began their descent. Whymper and young Peter Taugwalder came down from the summit last. Croz, Hadow, Hudson, Douglas and the elder Taugwalder were already roped together and in line as the artist and the teenage guide caught up with them. "Great care was being taken." Whymper noted. "Only one man was moving at a time; when he was firmly planted the next man advanced." When they reached the steep traverse off the ridge that had been their only difficulty on the way up, Douglas Hadow again began to have trouble keeping his footing. Michael Croz stood below Hadow, placing the young climber's feet into the toeholds afforded by the sheer rock wall. Then, Hadow slipped and fell against Croz, knocking him off the cliff.

Whymper later described the accident: "In another moment Hudson was dragged from his steps, and Lord F. Douglas immediately after him. All this was the work of a moment.... Immediately we heard Croz's exclamation, old Peter and I planted ourselves as firmly as the rock would permit: the rope was taut between

us, and the jerk came on both of us as one man. We held; but the rope broke midway between Taugwalder and Lord Francis Douglas. For a few seconds we saw our unfortunate companions sliding downwards on their backs, and spreading out their hands, endeavoring to save themselves. They passed from our sight uninjured, disappeared one by one, and fell from precipice to precipice on to the Matterhorn glacier below, a distance of nearly 4,000 feet.... From the moment the rope broke it was impossible to help them." Stunned by the sudden accident, Whymper and the two Taugwalders clung to the steep rock wall, staring after their companions.

Down in the village of Zermatt, a young boy excitedly reported having seen an avalanche high up on the mountain. "For the space of a half-hour," Whymper wrote, "we remained on the spot without moving a single step. The two Taugwalders, paralyzed by terror, cried like infants, and trembled in such a manner as to threaten us with the fate of the others." Finally, Whymper shepherded the Taugwalders across the slippery rock wall to the safety of the ridge. "I asked for the rope which had given way," he wrote, "and found, to my surprise--indeed, to my horror--that it was the weakest of the three ropes. It was not brought--and should not have been employed--for the purpose for which it was used. It was old rope and, compared with the others, was feeble. It was intended as a reserve in case we had to leave much rope behind attached to rocks.

"For the next two hours," Whymper wrote, "I thought almost every moment that the next would be my last; for the Taugwalders, utterly unnerved, were not only incapable of giving assistance, but were in such a state that a slip might have been expected from them at any moment." Tying pieces of the remaining rope onto rocks for added safety, the survivors inched their way back down the Zermatt Ridge. "Several times," Whymper recalled, "old Peter turned with an ashy face and faltering limbs, and said, with terrible emphasis, 'I cannot!'"

Just before nightfall, the three men reached the base of the mountain. "We frequently looked, but in vain, for traces of our unfortunate companions; we bent over the ridge and cried to them, but no sound returned." Whymper and the Taugwalders bivouacked "upon a wretched slab," barely large enough to hold them. Early the next morning, the men reached Zermatt with news of the tragedy.

A quickly organized search party found the mangled bodies of Croz, Hudson and Hadow embedded in the glacier below the mountain. Lord Francis Douglas's body was never found. When Douglas Hadow's boots were examined, it was found that the hobnails on their soles were worn almost smooth. Because Whymper had not returned with the broken rope, having used it to safeguard the final descent, his story was called into question.

Old Peter Taugwalder was wildly accused of having cut the rope at the last minute to save himself, his son, and Whymper from being pulled down with the others. Although an official inquest found no proof for this accusation, Taugwalder was tainted by its implications for the rest of his life. He later emigrated to America.

Edward Whymper became famous in the aftermath of his triumph and tragedy

on the Matterhorn. Supporting himself by giving lectures and writing books, he gained a reputation as a solitary and remote individual, as well as a heavy drinker. He went on to climb high mountains in South America, Greenland and the Canadian Rockies. Whymper died of natural causes in Switzerland in 1911.

**SOURCES:**

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