

# The First American Accident on the Matterhorn

J. MONROE THORINGTON

THE TRAGEDY which overtook members of Edward Whymper's party on the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865 was the most dramatic event in 19th century mountaineering. By that time the avalanche on Mont Blanc, which swept to death three of Dr. Hamel's guides in 1820<sup>1</sup>, was almost forgotten by a succeeding generation that accepted climbing as sport with attendant risk rather than as scientific enterprise. Despite its hazard, the Matterhorn remained a goal which additional British<sup>2</sup> and other mountaineers were eager to attain. In the following decade a few Americans made the ascent: Miss Brevoort and W. A. B. Coolidge (A.C.), September 4-5, 1871 (Zermatt-Breuil) ; T. Alston Bishop (A.C.), July 21-22, 1873 ; William Whitewright Stuart, October 2, 1873 (Breuil-Zermatt) ; D. L. Pickman, August 12, 1875, and H. R. Whitehouse (A.C.), August 23-24, 1875. The first American to die on the mountain was William Oxnard Moseley, Jr.

He was born in Boston, Mass., October 30, 1848, the son of William Oxnard Moseley<sup>3</sup> and Caroline L. Fairbanks. His mother died in 1856, and the boy, not quite eight years of age, was sent by sea to St. Augustine, Fla., where he lived with an aunt and attended school for more than two years. He returned to Boston, entered the Public Latin School in September, 1859, and matriculated at Harvard College in July, 1865. He received his A.B. in 1869. In a biographical sketch, dated May 10, 1869, prepared for his class book, he wrote: "I can hardly say that I have any particular fondness for any study, but think I am more interested in music than in anything else . . . in all probability I shall travel for a year or so, and then try my luck in business."

Soon after graduation he went abroad for a short time, and, after coming back to this country, again sailed and remained for a period of five years, making extensive journeys in Europe and the East. Several summers from the beginning of June to the end of September were spent in the mountains.

Probably he was in the Alps in 1870 and heard of the new catastrophe on Mont Blanc, which for the first time involved Americans, when Dr. Bean and Mr. Randall,<sup>4</sup> their companion, three guides and five porters were lost in a raging blizzard. Certainly he knew the history of the Matterhorn.

Travel aroused Moseley's interest in mountaineering. In the summer of 1874 we find him making a pedestrian tour of Switzerland with his Harvard classmate James Bourne Ayer (1848-1910; H. 1869; M.D. 1873). On July 6-7 they ascended Mont Blanc. "Approaching the top, the roar of cannon was heard fired from Chamouny, announcing the result . . . Whilst the tourists were at dinner, at the Hôtel des Alpes, four rounds of cannon were fired on the grounds in honor of the event, bouquets presented, and a general ovation. This was the 438th ascension, and the fourth successful one made this year." In August Moseley climbed the Ortler.

In 1876 he was again in the Eastern Alps, with an English friend, A. E. Craven (A.C.), where their climbs, with the noted guide Joseph Spechtenhauser, included Hintere Schwärze (sixth recorded ascent), Kleinleitenjoch, second recorded passage) and Hochwilde (fifth ascent). He then went to Zermatt and climbed the Untergabelhorn.

Moseley became House Officer in the Massachusetts General Hospital in August, 1877, and was unable to visit the Alps that summer, this being partially compensated for by his election to the Alpine Club (London).

He acquired his M.D. from Harvard in 1878 and immediately left for Europe. His companion in the Oberland was Emil Burckhardt, a member of the Basel Section of the Swiss Alpine Club, with whom he climbed the Blümlisalphorn and the Bietschhorn. His list for this season also includes Zermatt climbs: Monte Rosa from Lysjoch, Triftjoch and Col Durand. Moseley spent the winter in Vienna, with additional medical study.

1879 was a year of greater ambition and also a fateful one. In the last three days of July Moseley added to his record Eigerjoch, Jungfraujoch and the Jungfrau from Wengenalp. Then, with Craven, he made the first traverse from the Gross to the Klein Doldenhorn, and the second passage (north to south) of the Viescherjoch. Continuing to Zermatt, they took with them two of the ablest Oberland guides, Peter Rubi<sup>6</sup> and Christian Inäbnit, both of Grindelwald. It was a strong party of four that left Zermatt on the evening of August 13, intending to ascend the Matterhorn and return in one day, thereby avoiding a night in the dilapidated hut on the northeast ridge. They arrived at the summit at nine o'clock on the morning of the 14th and began the descent after 20 minutes. Moseley had complained more than once that the rope was more of a hindrance than an advantage. Crossing the shoulder, they descended the difficult rocks where an iron chain was

stretched, which Moseley scorned. The party then reached a point about 45 minutes above the hut.

As the major difficulties were now behind them, Moseley asked that the rope be taken off, but Rubi and Craven urged him to keep it on until the hut was reached. In a few minutes, however, Moseley untied from the rope, saying that he could do better without it. Rubi yielded, the others unroped as well and all proceeded rapidly downward. Twenty minutes from the hut they had to cross a projecting rock with a smooth surface. Rubi went over first, planting his axe to give Moseley, who followed, a firm foothold. Moseley declined this aid and, placing one hand on the rock, attempted to vault over it. His foot slipped, his axe flew out of his hand and he fell from the rock onto snow, down which he slid on his back. He nearly succeeded in stopping himself with his elbows, but the snow was solidly frozen and he fell to the rocks beneath. Twisting with great effort, he tried to grasp these, but his velocity was too great and he hurtled from rock to rock until he disappeared from view. Three days later his broken body was found immediately above the bergschrund of the Furggen glacier, 2000 feet below the point of the accident. He was brought down to Zermatt by three guides and several British climbers, Craven<sup>7</sup> among them. Moseley's remains were interred below the south wall of the English church, but subsequently his body was brought back to this country and buried at Mount Auburn, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Mr. C. E. Mathews, then president of the Alpine Club, who was at Zermatt, presented the foregoing information in a letter to *The Times*, and added: "I was shocked to find, on examining the remains, that Mr. Moseley had hardly any nails in one of his boots, and all rock-climbers know how impossible it is to ensure steadiness under such conditions, and it is quite clear that if the rope had not unhappily been removed, I would not have had to trouble you with this letter."

The site of the accident is still known as the "Moseley-platte." In the Zermatt museum is a photo-portrait of Moseley,<sup>8</sup> as well as one of his boots and the punctured metal canteen he was carrying at the time. His name is perpetuated in the Moseley Professorship of Surgery, Harvard Medical School, and in the Moseley Memorial Building (1916), Massachusetts General Hospital.

"This young man, full of hope and promise in his chosen work, accomplished within the walls of this hospital the whole of his participation in his humane profession." In remarks<sup>9</sup> made at the dedication of the building, a fellow house officer said: "Moseley, somewhat older than the rest and having a Continental experience, was easily our leader. He had a rare

suavity and geniality which made him extremely good company. In short, he was a man of the world in the best sense. He was not a grind, but had the faculty of grasping the essential point of a subject. He developed marked ability and rare good judgment, was faithful and kind to his patients, and gave promise of becoming a brilliant member of the profession. His senior physicians relied on his observations and often entrusted to him important treatments of the patients."

Although Moseley was an experienced climber, his death must be attributed to over-confidence, premature unroping, and footgear that was inadequate even by the standard of the time. He had not sufficiently heeded Whymper's warning: "Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are naught without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste; look well to each step; and from the beginning think what may be the end."

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NOTES:

1. J. M. Thorington, "Dr. Hamel, Impassive Scientist," *A.J.* 58, Nov. 1951, p. 169.
2. F. C. Grove (A.C.), August 11, 1867, was the first traveller to ascend after Whymper.
3. 1815-94. Harvard, 1836; Divinity School, 1842. For a time he studied and practiced law, abandoning this for the ministry. Married (1) 1847 Caroline Louisa Fairbanks (d. 1856); (2) 1868 Julia Maria Hale. He left legacies to Harvard Medical School and to the city of Newburyport. The family has been traced back to Ernald de Moseley, Lord of Moseley, in the time of King John. Sir Nicholas Moseley was Lord Mayor of London in 1599. The American branch stems from John Maudesley or Moseley (d. 1661), who emigrated from Lancashire, England, and settled in Dorchester in 1630, the first of his name in Massachusetts. See E. S. Moseley, *A Genealogical Sketch of One Branch of the Moseley Family* (pp. Newburyport, 1878). The subject of this memoir had an unusual list of ancestors who were college graduates: Jabez Fox, H. 1665; John Fox, H. 1698; Jabez Fox, H. 1727; Samuel Moseley, H. 1729; Ebenezer Moseley, Y. 1763; Edward Oxnard, H. 1767; Ebenezer Moseley, Y. 1802; William Oxnard Moseley, H. 1836.
4. J. M. Thorington, "The High Adventure of Mr. Randall," *A.A.J.*, 1945, 5:3, p. 333.
5. Entry in the Grands Mulets book: "July 6, 1874. James B. Ayer, M.D., W. O. Moseley, Jr., Boston, U. S. A. Made the ascent of Mont Blanc. Fine. Guide François Devouassoud, whom we can recommend highly. Porter Joseph Couttet. Joined Mr. King [George King, F.R.S., of London] at this point and made the ascent with him."
6. Peter Rubi did not long survive. In the following year (1880) with Dr. Arnold Haller, Vice-President of the newly formed Section Burgdorf of the S.A.C., and the guide, Fritz Roth, the party vanished in stormy weather en route from the Grimsel via the Lauteraarjoch to attend the inauguration of the Gleckstein Hut. No trace of them was found until their remains came to light at the foot of the Lauteraar glacier in August, 1959, and were interred at Guttannen. (*Die Alpen*, 1959, 35:11, p. 243.)

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7. Claude Wilson (A.C.) wrote to J.M.T. in 1937: "I, with my brother and two guides made the ascent on August 22nd [1879], and F. Morshead with Melchior Anderegg started with us to recover Moseley's axe." Wilson knew Craven well and stated that "he was never the same afterward." He gave up climbing after 1880.
8. For Moseley, see Mumm, *Alpine Club Register* III (1925). His climbs were reported as follows: 1874: *Tourist*, 422. 1876: *A.J.* 8, 161; 9, 494; 13, 123; Richter, *Erschliessung der Ostalpen* II, 337, 357, 362. 1878: *Jahrbuch, Schweizer Alpenclub* xv, 290, 301. 1879: *Neue Alpenpost* x, 55; *A.J.* 9, 372, 259. Burckhardt's In Memoriam notice of Moseley appeared in *Neue Alpenpost* x, p. 141. In this he states that Moseley had done much work in the Sierra Nevada (Spain), but details are lacking.
9. *Harvard College, Class of 1869, 50th Anniversary, Eleventh Report*, pp. 201-3. This book contains plates of the Moseley Memorial Building and of the commemorative plaque placed there. The writer is indebted to Harvard Archives for this volume as well as for Moseley's portrait and photostats of a biographical sketch Moseley himself prepared for his 1869 class book, and various press clippings dealing with the accident: *Boston Transcript*, Aug. 16, 1879; Aug. 20, 1879; *Christian Register*, Aug. 30, 1879.

