

## Across the Col d'Hérens in 1892

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LOOKING back to memorable days spent in the Swiss Alps I can recall few more delightful in retrospect than those spent in a trip to Arolla and Zermatt. It was the summer of 1892 when I left Vevey by train for Sion in the valley of the Rhône. The post wagon took me up the Val d'Hérens as far as Evolena, through a deeply cut picturesque gorge. A priest on the way to his charge proved delightful company. From Evolena I climbed by a good path to the Mayens d'Arolla situated at a height of 6570 ft. A favorite resort for the English climbing fraternity, it takes its name from the Alpine cedars (arolla) which cover the mountain side.

The next day proved fair. I was asked to join two Englishmen in a trip over the Pas de Chèvres, which descends via a steep bit of rock (*mauvais pas*) to the Glacier de Durand at the foot of Mt. Blanc de Seilon. We returned to Arolla via the Col de Riedmatten. After a satisfying day's outing I was looking forward to the table-d'hôte dinner when the telegram arrived from my brother at Evolena. We had planned to join forces for a visit to Zermatt via the Col d'Hérens. He was waiting for me, and had engaged the services of a guide for the crossing of the col on the next day. An interchange of telegrams followed. But the guide refused to postpone the excursion, averring an engagement with another *Herr.* for climbs in Zermatt. Most reluctantly I was forced to leave Arolla about 8 o'clock that evening. With the aid of a grown Swiss lad whose knowledge of by ways shortened the distance considerably, I made a quick trip to the Ferpècle Alp, which was reached about 11 o'clock. There was time for only two hours rest in nothing more inviting than the guides quarters. Towards 1 o'clock after the usual breakfast of black coffee and a slice of bread, we started by lantern light for our long ascent. Via the Alp Bricolla we arrived at the upper part of the Ferpècle Glacier, the Wandfluh on our left. As we mounted the long arête of the Dent Blanche came into view.

Those travellers who know only the eastern face of the Dent Blanche as seen from the Hörnli—with its long ridges of rock

partly snow-covered and glistening as the sun strikes them—can have no idea what a contrast the western face presents.

The precipitous rocks quite bare of snow and ice rise abruptly from the névé and fall on the northern side in one gigantic descent to the Col du Grand Cornier. Many gens d'armes and one great tower break the skyline. One day in August 1890 three experienced members of the English Alpine Club were making a guideless ascent of the Dent Blanche.<sup>1</sup> They reached the summit, but on the way down were overtaken by a thunderstorm as they were starting the descent of the tower. Complete darkness enveloped them broken only by flashes of lightning which caused two of them to drop their ice-axes. Further descent was impossible. They spent the night on a narrow ledge of rock, but managed to rope themselves securely to the mountain side. Fortunately the night was not excessively cold and they were able to complete the descent to Zermatt the next day, meeting on the way parties sent to their rescue.

We reached the highest point on the col about 11 o'clock, a magnificent viewpoint. In the immediate foreground the Dent d'Hérens' great massif of rock was conspicuous; across the Zermatt Glacier the long arête of the Matterhorn rising from the glacier to the summit and flanked by the Italian ridge, seemed to pierce the sky.

The descent to the Stockje was tedious, the sun was hot on the glacier and a few open crevasses had to be detoured. We pushed on to the Staffel Alp and Zermatt arriving about 2 P.M., to find that no beds were available in the Seiler hotels. Finally we secured accommodation at the Schwarzsee Hotel, an ascent of 3000 ft. above Zermatt on the Hörnli ridge. "*Cà valait le peine. Nous n'avions aucune envie de coucher à la belle étoile.*"

In conclusion may I emphasize some advantages that attend the crossings of passes as against the ascents of peaks—they are the greater ease of accomplishment, the lessened strain since the time factor is less important, and more leisure to enjoy the Alpine scenes.

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<sup>1</sup> *A. J.* 15, 404.