

Over the Col de Balme in 1883

CHARLES FRANCIS JUDSON¹

DURING the years of 1882-84 it was my good fortune to be a pupil of Sillig's School, located at Vevey-la Tour on Lake Geneva, conducted by Mrs. Edwin and Edouard Sillig. A pleasant feature of the school program consisted in week-end walks on the neighboring hills and peaks: When the snow-conditions permitted, we took our *luges* along for sledding on Mont Cubli and the slopes above les Avants. Our longer excursions took us as far as the Lac de Joux in the Jura Mountains, Champéry at the foot of the Dent du Midi, and the Chamossaire near Villars-sur-Ollon. Once or twice a year a three-day excursion made a pleasant vacation from our school duties.

It was early in the month of May, 1883, when we set out from Vevey for the "Grand Tour," the party consisting of a dozen of the older boys (aged 14-16 years) and Mr. Sillig. The train provided transportation as far as Martigny up the valley of the Rhone. From there we walked over the Tête Noire Pass to Argentière (4100 ft.) in the valley of Chamounix, and some four miles from that resort. Our hotel faced the glacier d'Argentière, with fine views of the Aiguille Verte and Aiguille du Chardonnet. The next day was spent in strolls around Chamounix. The hotels were closed, as the season had not yet begun. The following day was set for our return trip. Mr. Edwin Sillig, who was a good walker, and of powerful physique, proposed to vary our return trip by crossing the Col de Balme (7232 ft.). This pass commands a magnificent view of the Mont Blanc massif. The ascent to be made was about 3000 ft. and the distance from Argentière to the col was about three miles. After the usual breakfast of café-au-lait and a crust of bread, we set out with our knapsacks and wearing gaiters over our well greased boots. Our hearts were gay and our spirits high, the adventure had begun.

The path ascended by easy grades, at first over meadows, and crossed several brooks. We went on speedily, mounted a rise of land and soon came to freshly fallen snow. As far as the eye could see, glistening white fields of snow rose steeply ahead towards the Col

¹ The writer, a Philadelphia physician, is a mountaineer whose climbs between 1888 and 1892 are listed in *Early American Ascents in the Alps*, p. 75.—[ED.].

de Balme. The depth of the snow increased as we mounted, and there was no hard crust to support our weight. We sank in the snow over our boot-tops at first, then halfway to our knees and, crossing, the drifts over our knees. Our leader had the tiresome job of breaking the steps. Hours passed, the col seemed no nearer and our progress was very slow. For short periods some of the older boys took Mr. Sillig's place as leader, but they soon wearied. *Serons nous bientôt en haut?* was the frequent cry of our headmaster. And the answer came: *Il faut bien avoir du courage. Nous arriverons surement.*

Towards noon we lunched on bread and chocolate, and Mr. Sillig handed us each a lump of sugar flavored with a few drops of cognac. Revived by this ration we resumed our course, to reach the summit of the pass about one o'clock. The view met our highest expectations and we rested briefly. On the descent to Trient and the Col de Forclaz conditions were more favorable for trampers, as the path lay through woods in part. Soon we regained the highway on the Tête Noire and reached Martigny in time to catch the train for Vevey in the evening.

The walk over the Col de Balme under ordinary conditions in summertime is not difficult. We school-boys found it arduous and a severe test of our endurance. The years have passed and I have enjoyed long days on peaks, passes and glaciers. But the recollections of that youthful excursion in the Alpine snows are still vivid in my memories.