

THE FIRST RECORDED CROSSING OF THE COL DURAND

BY WILLIAM MATHEWS

We are indebted to Capt. D. F. O. Dangar for kindly supplying this narrative, which is taken from a paper read before the Alpine Club by William Mathews on March 16, 1860. See also *P.P.G.* II. i. 360—362.

On p. 77 of Dr. Dubi's *Guide des Alpes Valaisannes*, vol. 2, it is stated that, apart from various legendary crossings connected with the cattle market at Aosta and a reputed annual visit prior to 1832 of an itinerant cloth merchant, the Col Durand was crossed in 1858 by a party of young persons from Val d'Anniviers, among whom was Joseph Viennin (or Vianin). There is a similar statement regarding this presumed 1858 crossing in Ball's *Western Alps*, p. 482. In view of Mathews' account of Viennin's words and attitude as described in his narrative, it is difficult to accept the statement that Viennin had crossed the pass in the previous year. No further evidence is provided in the references above quoted.—EDITOR.

WE walked through the street of Vissoye at a quarter past six, and were addressed in energetic language by several of the inhabitants, who prophesied all kinds of evil if we went further that evening. We received still more forcible warnings beyond, at the miserable chalet of Ayer, but marched forward notwithstanding. At last we got to another cluster of chalets, which we thought must be Zinal; but it was now quite dark, and we could find nothing but *mayens*, or places for storing hay. We wandered disconsolately backwards and forwards, when fortunately relief appeared in the form of a man with a mule. 'You have overshot the mark,' said he, 'the inn is a little further down.' We retraced our steps for a few minutes, and suddenly a gleam of light shot out of a window on the right. We walked up to the chalet whence it proceeded, and exactly at a quarter past eight stepped into the Hôtel Durand, chez Baptiste Epinay.

The first apartment we entered was a kitchen, consisting of four bare walls, with a fire burning on the floor; from this a short step ladder led up into the travellers' room, which contained four small beds, one in each corner; two microscopic deal tables with microscopic washing apparatus to match, a microscopic dining table in the centre of the room, and four deal chairs. Below this state apartment was another for host and guides, much less luxuriously furnished. I made almost certain that Croz and Charlet would have stayed at Vissoye, but they presented themselves exactly an hour after the time of our own arrival.

Notwithstanding the homeliness of the lodging Epinay catered for us in a way that did him infinite credit; he provided respectable coffee, meat and bread, and the milk, cream, butter and honey were unexceptionable.

We spent a lazy day on the 14th, reconnoitring our new position, and in making arrangements for the Weißshorn on the morrow. The

Hôtel Durand, before it was an inn, was the parsonage to a small chapel adjoining, and the priest, who had been the previous tenant, had ornamented the ceiling beam of the hall with the following strange inscription :

JESUS MARIE ET JOSEPH LA SOSIETTEZ DES ZINAL.

To complete the medley of languages a mountain close at hand bears the Italian designation of Lo Besso, another piece of inexplicable nomenclature.

The view from the hotel was very disappointing, as the Weisshorn was entirely hidden by the Arpitetta alp. Looking straight up the valley we saw the extremity of the Zinal Glacier, bounded on the right by the Pigne de la Lex, and on the left by Lo Besso, a lofty rocky pinnacle with a forked top, which Epinay had recently ascended and crowned with an iron cross. Further on in the same direction was a beautiful snow col, occupying the hollow between the Pointe de Zinal and an unnamed dome of snow to the left of it, an outwork of the Obergabelhorn. This is the spot across which Mr. Ball stated in his note to Mr. Hinchliff's paper that a pass probably existed to Zermatt. Epinay assured me that he and three others had crossed it two months previously, and he named it the Col de la Dent Blanche, from its proximity to that mountain, which, however, like the Weisshorn, is unhappily not visible from Zinal. Epinay took the warmest interest in our proposed expedition, and if we could have discovered a practicable route to the summit of the Weisshorn, it would certainly have ensured the success of the Hôtel Durand.

Here follows an account of their attempt on the Weisshorn from the north. They crossed the Col de Tracuit to the watershed between the Turtmann and Bies Glaciers, and then returned to Zinal.

Foiled in our great expedition we resolved to atone for it in some measure by making the new pass to Zermatt, and questioned Epinay about his former passage. He repeated his statement that he was one of four who had crossed it two months previously, and that once on the other side you walked along the pass all down to Zermatt. We asked a local guide named Joseph Viennin whether he would for ten francs carry our knapsacks to the col, and he replied that if we would give him fifteen he would go with us all the way. His offer was gladly accepted, and at twenty minutes past four on the morning of August 17, we bid adieu to Zinal. Scarcely had we started when Viennin informed us that Epinay had never been across—he was quite sure of that ; and that we had better go by the Trift Pass, for that he and some men of Zinal had cut steps in the rocks there and had made it much easier than it had hitherto been. This information only added a fresh incentive to our desire to take the new route, and is a pretty good example of the constant difficulty which Swiss travellers experience in getting any trustworthy statements from a local source.

We followed the path which had led us three days before to the Montagne de la Lex, and keeping lower down upon the mountain side walked along it at a small height above the glacier as far as we could.

We then took to the ice and crossed the glacier diagonally to the base of Lo Besso, arriving at the foot of the steep inclined portion of it which Mr. Hinchliff has described. The sloping ice was thickly covered with small sharp stones firmly frozen in, which gave good foothold, so that we walked up it without difficulty. Beyond Lo Besso the glacier opens out into a large basin encompassed by lofty peaks with masses of rock called Le Roc Noir, rising out of the snow almost in the centre of the basin. Here Viennin made another vigorous stand for the Trift, painting in the most lively colours the danger of attempting a passage over an untraversed col. 'You may go by the Trift, if you choose,' I observed, 'but in that case you will have your day's walk by yourself, and not find your fifteen francs at the end of it.' 'Monsieur,' he replied, 'I will go wherever you wish; I have at any rate done my duty in pointing out to you the risk you are incurring.' Viennin reduced to obedience, we left the Trift route to the left, and passed at the back of Le Roc Noir, where we found a little run of water. We halted for breakfast at twenty minutes past eight. Viewed from this point the upper snow basin of the Zinal Glacier presented a scene of the most wonderful sublimity. The dark precipices of Le Roc Noir cut off all view of the valley, so that we appeared seated on one side of a mighty mountain amphitheatre, paved with broad sweeps of stainless snow, and roofed by the deep blue vault of heaven. Coming from Lo Besso the peaks in view were the Rothorn, the Trifhorn, just at the base of which was the little notch in the ridge through which lay the way by the Trift Pass to Zermatt. Then came the Obergabelhorn, and the nameless dome of snow I have before mentioned; on the right of this was the wide snow col we were about to traverse, lying between it and the rock-tipped Pointe de Zinal, beyond which was a second col, and then the immense mass of the Dent Blanche, whose magnificent black precipices forbid all access to its summit in this direction. Before leaving our resting place we made a very careful survey of the snow slopes below the col, and particularly of an enormous crevasse which circled round almost from the Gabelhorn to the Dent Blanche, which was evidently to be the difficulty of the excursion, and indeed had been plainly discernible from Zinal. After lingering nearly an hour at Le Roc Noir we marched forward again, zigzagging slowly upwards, and saluted by incessant salvos of artillery from the falling masses of the Dent Blanche. The crevasse was many feet in width and of great depth, and on the further side the snow rose up in a vertical wall varying from twelve to thirty feet in height. It appeared bridged in two places, and one of these, which we at once made for, was where the wall was the lowest. As ill luck would have it, just at this very spot the wall curled over into a cornice, and prevented our climbing up. What was to be done? Cut through the cornice, was suggested; but that would not do, for the bridge we were standing upon was so narrow that we could not get out of the way of the falling blocks, and we should also have run the risk of breaking in the bridge, which was none of the securest. In this emergency Croz and Charlet

went to look at the other place, and when they were gone Viennin took up the axe and behaved in a way which quite atoned for his previous obstinacy. Six or eight feet to the left of the bridge the cornice ceased and the wall sloped back a little. Viennin cut footholes in a horizontal direction, and another line of holes above them in which he could place his hands, and by this means he walked along the wall until he was clear of the cornice, and then cut his way up to the top. Although pretty well accustomed to the difficulties of the higher Alpine regions I felt a disagreeable qualm at seeing Viennin sticking like a fly on the face of the wall above the profound crevasse, and was not a little satisfied when he was out of danger.

When the Chamonix men reappeared the difficulty was conquered, and the ascent of the rest of the party rendered comparatively easy. Viennin took up a secure position at the top, Croz flung up one end of the rope to him, and taking hold of the other climbed up the steps. The knapsacks were then hauled up one by one, and Croz shouldered his, and was immediately heard vigorously at work with the axe cutting more steps above, and sending fragments of frozen snow flying over our heads as we stood beneath the cornice. I followed next, having tied the rope firmly round my waist before starting, and Viennin pulled it in as I ascended; my brother and Charlet adopted the same plan. We found a steep snow slope at the top of the wall requiring step-cutting all the way up; but Croz worked away with hearty good will, and at a quarter before twelve we were standing safely upon the col.

Without wishing in any way to disparage the climbing of a mountain it seems to me that there are some particulars in which the passage of a col—especially if it be a new one—is of greater interest. The glacier difficulties which have to be grappled with are certainly more severe, and the traveller is constantly tempted to cut off his retreat, calculating upon getting down upon the further side, but entirely ignorant as to what he may happen to find there—a proceeding which never fails to give an agreeable excitement to the expedition. Add to this that no distant view is seen during the ascent, but that it bursts upon him suddenly on getting to the summit of the ridge. I wish I could convey the faintest conception of the sight we gazed upon from the position we had reached. Unquestionably the most stupendous object in the Alps is the Matterhorn whose apparently narrow pinnacle, rising up 4000 feet from the Théodule Glacier, produces so powerful an effect upon the mind of every traveller who views it from Zermatt. But on that side it is seen in profile only, and we are now looking upon its full face as it stands in mighty majesty before us on the further side of the great Zmutt Glacier, which flows on silently far beneath our feet. Seen from Zermatt it suggests the idea of dangerous mountain building, but from our standing place rather that of the most unconquerable strength, rising as it does from an immense foundation gently narrowing upwards, and forming the pedestal not of a pinnacle, but of a gigantic square-faced block, which never probably will feel the pressure of any human foot. We not only command the Matterhorn but the

Dent d'Hérens on the right of it, a striking mass of rock, and between the two the snow col, which we determine by a level observation to be exactly the same height as our standing place. I once thought that the Matterhorn might possibly be climbed from this col, but a single glance is quite sufficient to dissipate any such illusion.

But threatening clouds come creeping up the valleys, and we must hurry onwards, for we know not what difficulties yet may lie before us. In front are the steep snow slopes of the Hohwang Glacier, bounded on the left by a snow ridge appearing to connect it with the Arben, and the ridge is terminated below by a patch of rocks which we determine to be the summit of the Ebihorn. We turn to take a last look northwards at our old enemy the Weisshorn, and down the green Einfischtal to the distant Wildstrubel on the further side of the valley of the Rhone; and then putting on the rope slide merrily down the snow, and passing a few difficulties of no very serious character alight safely on the Ebihorn at a quarter before one. And now there is no cause for haste, for the mists have disappeared, and we see that we can clamber down the rocks to the Zmutt Glacier, and our descent to Zermatt is secure; so we call a halt and determine to enjoy ourselves. We sit upon the rocks on the edge of the snow and select a large flat stone for dinner table. The knapsacks are unpacked, and a leg of mutton and a loaf of bread are quickly placed at the top and bottom of the festive stone, with side dishes of cheese, butter and hard-boiled eggs. Then, uncorking some bottles of red wine, we plunged them up to the necks in snow, close to a little run of water which flows downwards with a delicious gurgling sound.

But the luxuries of our dinner formed the smallest part of our enjoyment. As we had descended the glacier the various well known peaks of the Monte Rosa chain had come successively into view, a range of mountains which no one with the smallest love of nature can look upon for the first time without emotion, or can revisit without ever increasing wonder and admiration. We are now regarding them from a point of view which, so far as I know, is almost without an equal. On our right is the Col d'Hérens, from which we looked down the Zmutt Glacier to the head of the valley of Zermatt, and then up the ice streams of Findelen and Gorner to the pass of the Weisstor, while opposite to us, bathed in the full light of the midday sun, is every peak of the Pennine chain from the Dent d'Hérens to the Strahlhorn.

While rapt in the beauties of this panorama I was attracted by the fissured icefield which occupies the hollow between Monte Rosa and the Lyskamm, and I thought of the earlier days of Alpine travel, and of the exploits of the intrepid Zumstein; how he climbed from Gressoney on the Italian side to the snow plateau between those two mountains, and passing the night in a crevasse at an altitude of nearly 14,000 feet, made the ascent of the Zumsteinspitze. Now it was evident that where Zumstein had gone up we could go down, and as the Monte Rosa Glacier looked difficult, but not forbidding, it struck

me that as we were about to enter Zermatt by one new pass, we could not do better than leave it by another, and make a passage direct to Gressoney.

The best route to take from the Ebihorn to Zermatt gave rise to some discussion. We might attempt (1) to get on to the Arben Glacier, and cross it to the slopes of the Gabelhorn, as high up as possible; (2) to descend the Ebihorn, cross the Arben ravine and take the Gabelhorn much lower down; or, lastly, to cross the Zmutt Glacier to its right bank, and take the path through the pine woods which leads down to Zermatt. We chose the second course, and scrambled down the rocky ledges of the Ebihorn, keeping as much to the left as possible in order to cross the narrow ravine through which flows the torrent from the Arben Glacier. We found several interesting plants upon the rocks, among others the pretty little *Eritrichium nanum* growing in small round cushions covered with starlike flowers of beautiful cobalt blue. Every attempt to get into the Arben ravine having been foiled by the precipitous character of the Ebihorn on that side, we soon found ourselves by the side of the Zmutt Glacier, on a pleasant pasture marked Schafalpen on Studer's map, and just at the point where the Arben torrent runs under the ice. Here our guides declared themselves unanimously in favour of passing the glacier, as it is impossible to walk along its left bank in consequence of a range of almost vertical cliffs immediately in contact with the ice. But I had crossed it from the same spot three years before, having taken by mistake the wrong side of the glacier in descending from the Col d'Hérens, and had so very lively a recollection of the blocks of rock with which its lower extremity is covered, that I determined not to take that route if any other were practicable. I was anxious, too, to go to Zermatt by a new path, and by one commanding the view of the chain of Monte Rosa, which I wished to keep in sight as long as possible. Accordingly having sent our guides across the glacier, my brother and I ascended the base of the Gabelhorn, and when we were fairly above the cliffs struck along it in an easterly direction. But we found we had involved ourselves in a troublesome and laborious scramble, and one which, coming at the close of a hard day's work, proved extremely fatiguing; ridge after ridge had to be climbed, gorge after gorge crossed, and blocks after blocks clambered over, before we thought it safe to descend. The base of the Gabelhorn towards Zermatt consists of a series of steps with precipitous faces, and I expected every moment that we should find ourselves at the top of a precipice and be unable to go further that evening. After some trouble we got down to the Triftbach at the spot where the gorge is spanned by a wooden bridge, and decorating our caps with the flowers of the edelweiss walked quietly through the green meadows into the village, reaching the Hôtel du Mont Rose at six o'clock, exactly an hour after the arrival of our guides.

We were in the highest spirits with the results of our expedition, which had succeeded far beyond our most sanguine anticipations, and I think the new col must hereafter take rank among the great passes

of the Alps. Indeed it would scarcely be possible to imagine a more perfect example of a col excursion than the one we had just made. There had been just difficulty enough to give an agreeable zest to the expedition, and no more, and a series of Alpine views of unsurpassed magnificence. It may be a matter of doubt whether we were the first party to make the passage. Before reaching the col I saw no reason to distrust Epinay's statement, for although he said nothing about the great crevasse, that may not have been in existence earlier in the year, at the alleged date of his expedition.

But the descent to Zermatt turned out so entirely different from anything he led us to expect, that I am inclined to believe he cannot have gone farther than the col—unless indeed he got into the realms of fairyland, and descended by the lost valley. Croz, Charlet, and Viennin disposed of the question without hesitation, and pronounced Epinay a humbug in a very emphatic manner. Whatever may be the truth of this matter I must question the propriety of naming the new pass the Col de la Dent Blanche, as it is separated from that mountain by the Pointe de Zinal, and between these two there may possibly be another pass, the descent from which on the southern side would be over the Schönbühl Glacier. I must therefore take the liberty of rejecting Epinay's name, and substituting that of the Col de Zinal; which, as the Pointe de Zinal is the nearest named peak, appears to me much more appropriate. There may be some question as to the best way of effecting the descent to Zermatt. My opinion is that our guides took the proper route, but it would be quite worth while to try to descend on to the Arben Glacier immediately after leaving the col, and so round by the base of the Gabelhorn. I regret that I am not able to give any observations which would fix the height of the Col de Zinal. I was unable to get a level sight either to the Trift Pass or the Col d'Hérens. It is probably about the same height as the former, or 11,500 feet.

We gave Viennin a *bonne main* of five francs in addition to his stipulated fee of fifteen with which he was perfectly contented, and, counting the daily pay of our two regular guides, our expedition had been very inexpensive. On the following day he returned to Zinal by way of the Trift Pass.