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1965 The Year of the Alps

SWISS TREK

By E. F. IRVINE

I have turned three score years and ten. For about twenty-eight of those twenty-five thousand days odd, I managed to break away from the conventional pattern of life in which I was brought up and took to the road.

Many of my contemporaries did the same but for the most part they travelled in company with some pre-arranged course ahead. I had — what turned out to be — the decided advantage of being alone, with a free and mobile plan of action, the chance traveller for a companion, and less risk at night of being stranded. Few chalets or hotels are without the extra bed and unable to put up a single person. But these facts I realized later, having failed in my search for a congenial fellow.

I took to the road above Montreux on 3rd September 1936, and spent the night at Les Avants. My first endeavour on that warm afternoon was to rid myself of the least essential items in my rucksack. This I did by handing them over to the friend who had come to see me off and who accompanied me for a mile or two of the way. It was my hope to approach the eastern boundary of Switzerland, to catch a glimpse of the Tödi and return by a different route.

'A pied', or its equivalent in German, seldom failed to strike heart and imagination, and a baker's boy with a large basket of bread on his back did not hesitate to join me and walk by my side, as did a friendly peasant woman in the long wet track between Col de Jaman and Montbovon. I remember, also with gratitude, a kind welcome at one of the few houses in La Tine, where I supped with the family and was allowed to help make up my bed. At night my clothes hung round the kitchen stove.

After a propitious start rain and cloud were seldom far off but sun shone on the road to Château d'Oex where I was treated to a second breakfast at the English School and to a dip in the swimming-pool. As yet my route was only vaguely charted and I turned off the main road near Flendruz, passing one of the wettest nights of that wet September in a chalet at Siernes Picat.

I left the next morning with the reiterated advice of my hostess sounding in my ears. I was to keep the Vanil Noir within sight; its massive form to the north-west, just discernible throughout the mist, would act as a beacon. Out of the desolate waste of mud which followed a few small huts stood up on poles. The first snow was sprinkling the jagged points of the successive Dents. As I made my descent into the valley a few hours later the air became filled with the sound of rushing water and a series of beautiful cascades met my eye. Towards afternoon I reached the main road and before long was drying myself in the hospitable warmth of a kitchen at Im Fang.

Crossing the Jaun Pass on the following day was a novel experience if only for the view it offered of the spectre-like crags of the Gastlose. Out of the mist they shot, suddenly and unexpectedly, with all the odd force of unreality. No greater contrast could be imagined between these strange apparitions in stone and the great snow-capped range of the Oberland which broke through a rift in the clouds soon after I had left the summit. On the way down I knocked at the door of a chalet, lying without neighbours on the slopes of Weissenbach, and a kind Swiss-German woman took me in.

The walk between Weissenbach and Wimmis is chiefly to be remembered for the village fountain of Erlenbach. There I dallied an hour or two, waiting for the milkman to appear and watching the dazzling water break into the colours of the spectrum on his shining cans. Once at Wimmis I took shelter in the station from the violence of the wind which had whipped up without prelude, bearing in its train dust, leaf and twig. The station-master, on hearing that I was a stranger in the district, accompanied me later into the town and made sure that I was housed for the night.

I was drawing near to the immense contour of the Oberland with continual indication from afar of snowfield and ice. Between Interlaken and Meiringen clear skies prevailed and the air was sweet with the scent of hay. It was the peak period of my tour from every point of view. A week later the sun was to light up the magnificence of the Klausen Pass, with its lovely vistas of glacier and fall, but there was nothing that approached the grandeur of Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau, and nothing to equal the enchantment of the Rosenlaui valley.

There towards the end of a very warm day I came upon a herd of lively cows, in process of being milked, and drank of their incomparable drink, rich and frothing. The solitary wonder of that echoing valley, soundless but for the continual klink of stones falling from the sides of the Wetterhorn, leaves behind it a memory difficult to convey.

Dusk was approaching and I hardly expected to come across another fellow-being in that lonely place, much less a woman in indoor frock and high-heeled shoes. Our meeting was one of mutual astonishment. The beauty of the evening had drawn a visitor out for an after-dinner stroll. Not without thankfulness I followed her back to a hotel and spent the night under its roof.

The valley was in shadow but sun was glinting on the Rosenlaui glacier as I set off for Meiringen the next morning. In that rich plenitude, cow, soil, and wayside flower seemed to participate in an ultimate degree of perfection. At the Reichenbach Falls I found a young German tourist with a guide book, engrossed in the fine display of water, and we exchanged our impressions. After a night at Innertkirchen I turned towards the Susten Pass and made my way up the beautiful Gadmen route, reaching the Steingletscher Hotel as the clouds were gathering.

It was a severe disappointment that rain and mist descended on the Susten, blotting out one of the finest viewpoints of the Alps. Slowly I descended the solitary track, since laid open to tourist traffic, and spent the night in Wassen. But I retraced my steps part of the way up the Susten on the following day and slept in a chalet at Meien. Cloud still lay upon the Pass.

Wassen, Insch, Spiringen, brought me to the slopes of the Klausen and more than half-way through the month. I was by now oddly inured to travelling on foot, to the uncertainties of where I might spend the night, to the chances, for or against, of finding the peripatetic milkman, to the stray company of the road which so helped to shorten the distance between one town, or village, and another.

Amongst the fine pastures of the Urnerboden I was joined by a cow, who, despite all endeavour to prevent her, crossed with me from one canton to the next, accompanying me much of the way to Linthal. The sun shone

warmly, making the walk, diversified by waterfall and glacier, one of the most delightful in memory. Here, if anywhere, I should have viewed from afar the Tödi peak, 'with its brilliant snowy crest', as Baedeker puts it.

I reached Glarus the same night, helped to that end by a vigorous young woman on a bicycle who would not leave me till she knew I was safe under a roof though her home was in the opposite direction. There I spent the Sunday, hoping in vain that the clouds would lift and give me a chance to reconnoitre. On the following morning, after collecting my letters, I set off northwards.

With my arrival at the Wallensee, shining blue-green through the yellow foliage of that fine September afternoon, my tour began to take on a more straitened aspect. The measure of economy which I had planned had been difficult to maintain and my resources were appreciably dwindling. Was return to Montreux on foot, by the Oberalp and Furka, a possible project? The weather also might have something to say.

A night was spent at Murg, on the Wallensee, another at Mels, before starting on the homeward journey. I was approaching the valley of the Rhine, and its magnificence accompanied me in days when travellers on the road were few. At the remote village of Untervaz, in the Grisons, where an imposing St. Bernard was on guard, the proprietress of the Inn who had connections with Montreux made me warmly welcome.

I must have ardently wished to return to the hill village of Tamins, with its picturesque church spire drawing me upwards at the end of the day, its simple and excellent inn, but it remains, with much that I saw in that swiftly-moving week between Glarus and Sedrun, a memory and a dream. The walk through the fine valley of Dissentis, begun in torrential rain and ending with a distinct drop in temperature, was greatly furthered by the arrival of a travelling salesman, who directed me down a problematical short-cut and gave me my bearings. Magnificently varied scenery, gay houses adorned with window-boxes, dark, southern-looking faces, are my last undying picture of a friendly Grisons.

On the morning of 27th September I set off for the Oberalp Pass and found there a region of bleak hillside and falling snow. Somewhere on those uncongenial heights my purpose began to break up and my tour was precipitated to an incomplete end. Andermatt lay white and wintry in the valley. Having reached its shelter I took refuge in the nearest hotel. . . .

Two days later I alighted on the platform at Montreux.

Did I, perhaps, catch a glimpse of the Tödi among the great company of brilliant peaks in canton Glarus? I should never know.



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