

Mark Twain in Switzerland

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MARK TWAIN IN SWITZERLAND

The rich, if somewhat broad, humour of Mark Twain finds nowhere happier expression than in his "A Tramp Abroad", a book published back in 1880. It is the record of a tour through Southern Germany and Switzerland, made by the author in the company of a courier named Harris, probably an imaginary character. The major part of the book concerns Switzerland, hence it should be of special interest to Swiss readers. The style is Mark Twain's at his best. As one follows his account, one seems to hear the soft Southern drawl and to see the twinkle in the eye of the celebrated author. But the story he tells is by no means all humour, though, always on the look-out for the incongruous, his keen observation and his gift of description have produced page after page of beautiful and instructive writing. Yet, every now and again, unexpectedly and as if he could not help it, that humour of his comes to the surface; it cannot be repressed. This entertaining twist is best illustrated by an actual quotation. How he saw the sunrise on the Rigi is described as follows:—

"Supper warmed us, and we went immediately to bed; but first, as Mr. Baedeker requests all tourists to call his attention to any errors they may find in his guide books, I dropped him a line to inform him that when he said the foot journey from Weggis to the summit was only three hours and a quarter, he missed it by just about three days. . . We curled up in the clammy beds, and went to sleep without rocking. We were so sodden with fatigue that we never stirred nor turned over till the booming blasts of the Alphorn aroused us. It may well be imagined that we did not lose any time. We snatched on a few odds and ends of clothing, cocooned ourselves in the proper red blankets, and plunged along the halls and out into the whistling wind bare-headed. We saw a tall wooden scaffolding on the very peak of the summit, a hundred yards away, and made for it. We rushed up the stairs to the top of this scaffolding and stood there, above the vast outlying world, with hair flying and our ruddy blankets waving in the fierce breeze.

" 'Fifteen minutes too late, at least', said Harris in a vexed voice. 'The sun is clear above the horizon.' 'No matter,' I said, 'it is a most magnificent spectacle, and we will see it do the rest of the rising, anyway.'

"In a moment we were deeply absorbed in the marvel before us, and dead to everything else. [Follows a description of the beautiful scenery.] We could not speak, we could hardly breathe. We could only gaze in drunken ecstasy and drink it in. Presently Harris exclaimed — 'Why, damnation, it's going down!' Perfectly true, we had missed the *morning* hornblow and slept all day. This was stupefying, Harris said — 'Look here, the sun isn't the spectacle, it's *us* stacked up here on the top of this gallows, in these idiotic blankets, and two hundred and fifty well-dressed men and women down here gawking up at us . . . and laughing their ribs loose . . . etc. etc."

Similar accounts are to be found throughout the book. There is a chapter on the French Duel, for instance, which is pure farce and most amusing. And in the appendix, the chapter devoted to "The awful German language" is extremely funny.

Books of this kind, though perhaps out of date, provide a welcome relief from the actualities of these distressing times. So if you would escape for a while from your miseries and your worries, settle in an arm-chair, switch off the radio or television and chuckle over "A Tramp Abroad", you will not regret it.

J.J.F.S.

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