

Dickens on Switzerland

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DICKENS ON SWITZERLAND

As is known, Charles Dickens spent many months of his life in Switzerland in a small house near Lausanne, where he worked at some of his novels. He had a good many kindly and some amusing words to say about our country and our people, as the following quotations from Forster's "Life of Charles Dickens", his great and intimate friend, will show:

Of the ordinary Swiss people he formed from the first a high opinion which everything during his stay among them confirmed. He thought it the greatest injustice to call them "the Americans of the Continent". In his first letters he said of the peasantry all about Lausanne that they were as pleasant a people as need be. He never passed, on any of the roads, man, woman, or child, without a salutation; and anything churlish or disagreeable he never noticed in them. "They have not," he continued, "the sweetness and grace of the Italians, or the agreeable manners of the better specimens of French peasantry, but they are admirably educated (the schools of this canton are extraordinarily good, in every little village), and always prepared to give a civil and a pleasant answer. There is no greater mistake, I was talking to my landlord, who was 18 years in the English navy, about it the other day, and he said he could not conceive how it had ever arisen, but that when he returned from his eighteen years' service in the English navy he shunned the people and had no interest in them until they gradually forced their real character upon his observation. We have a cook and a coachman here, taken at hazard from the people of the town; and I never saw more obliging servants, or people who did their work so truly 'with a will'. And in point of cleanliness, order, and punctuality to the moment, they are unrivalled..."

"One of the farmer's people — a sister, I think — was married from here the other day. The fondness of the Swiss for gunpowder on interesting occasions, is one of the drollest things. For three days before, the farmer himself, in the midst of his various agricultural duties, plunged out of a little door near my windows, about once in every hour, and fired off a rifle. I thought he was shooting rats who were spoiling the vines; but he was merely relieving his mind, it seemed, on the subject of the approaching nuptials. All night afterwards, he and a small circle of friends kept perpetually letting off guns under the casement of the bridal chamber. A Bride is always drest here, in black silk; but this bride wore merino of that colour, observing to her mother when she bought it (the old lady is 82, and works on the farm), 'You know, mother, I am sure to want mourning for you, soon; and the same gown will do.'" . . .

"As for the country, it cannot be praised too highly, or reported too beautiful. There are no great waterfalls, or walks through mountain-gorges, close at hand, as in some other parts of Switzerland; but there is a charming variety of enchanting scenery. There is the shore of the lake, where you may dip your feet, as you walk, in the deep blue water, if you choose. There are the hills to climb up, leading to the great heights above the town; or to stagger down, leading to the lake. There is every possible variety of deep green lanes, vineyard, cornfield, pasture-land and wood. There are excellent country roads that might be

in Kent or Devonshire; and, closing up every view and vista, is an eternally changing range of prodigious mountains — sometimes red, sometimes grey, sometimes purple, sometimes black, sometimes white with snow; sometimes close at hand; and sometimes very ghosts in the clouds and mist." . . .

On the ninth of August he wrote to me that there was to be a prodigious fête that day in Lausanne, in honour of the first anniversary of the proclamation of the New Constitution: "beginning at sunrise with the firing of great guns and twice two thousand rounds of rifles by two thousand men; proceeding at eleven o'clock with a great service, and some speechifying, in the church; and ending to-night with a great ball in the public promenade, and a general illumination of the town". The authorities had invited him to a place of honour in the ceremony; and though he did not go ("having been up till three o'clock in the morning, and being fast asleep at the appointed time"), the reply that sent his thanks expressed also his sympathy. He was the reader with this from having discovered, in the "old" or "gentlemanly" party of the place ("including of course the sprinkling of English who are always tory, hang 'em!"), so wonderfully sore a feeling about the revolution thus celebrated, that to avoid its fête the majority had gone off by steamer the day before, and those who remained were prophesying assaults on the unilluminated houses, and other excesses. Dickens had no faith in such predictions. "The people are as perfectly good-tempered and quiet always, as people can be. I don't know what the last Government may have been, but they seem to me to do very well with this, and to be rationally and cheaply provided for. If you believe what the discontented assert, you wouldn't believe in one solitary man or woman with a grain of goodness or civility. I find nothing but civility; and I walk about in all sorts of out-of-the-way places, where they live rough lives enough, in solitary cottages." The issue was told in two postscripts to his letter, and showed him to be so far right. "P.S. 6 o'clock afternoon. The fête going on, in great force. Not one of 'the old party' to be seen. I went down with one to the ground before dinner, and nothing would induce him to go within the barrier with me. Yet what they call a revolution was nothing but a change of government. Thirty-six thousand people, in this small canton petitioned against the Jesuits — God knows with good reason. The Government chose to call them 'a mob'. So, to prove that they were not, they turned the Government out. I honour them for it. They are a genuine people the Swiss. There is better metal in them than in all the stars and stripes of all the fustian banners of the so-called, and falsely-called, U-nited States. They are a thorn in the sides of European despots, and a good wholesome people to live near Jesuit-ridden kings on the brighter side of the mountains." "P.P.S. August 10th . . . The fête went off as quietly as I supposed it would; and they danced all night." . . .

The close of the letter (25th of July), mentioning two pieces of local news, gives intimation of the dangers incident to all Swiss travelling, and of such special precautions as were necessary for the holiday among the mountains he was now about to take. "My first news is that a crocodile is said to have escaped from the Zoological gardens at Geneva, and to be now 'zigzag-zigging' about the lake. But I can't make out whether this is a

great fact, or whether it is a pious fraud to prevent too much bathing and liability to accidents. The other piece of news is more serious. An English family whose name I don't know, consisting of a father, mother, and daughter, arrived at the hotel Gibbon here last Monday, and started off on some mountain expedition in one of the carriages of the country. It was a mere track, the road, and ought to have been travelled only by mules, but the Englishman persisted (as Englishmen do) in going on in the carriage; and in answer to all the representations of the driver that no carriage had ever gone up there, said he needn't be afraid he wasn't going to be paid for it, and so forth. Accordingly, the coachman got down and walked by the horses' heads. It was fiery hot; and, after much tugging and rearing, the horses began to back, and went down bodily, carriage and all, into a deep ravine. The mother was killed on the spot; and the father and daughter are lying at some house hard by, not expected to recover." . . .

"Mont Blanc, and the Valley of Chamonix, and the Mer de Glace, and all the wonders of that most wonderful place, are above and beyond one's wildest expectations. I cannot imagine anything in nature more stupendous or sublime. If I were to write about it now, I should quite rave — such prodigious impressions are rampant within me." . . .

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