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Autor(en): **Martinet, Paul**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1967)**

Heft 1524

PDF erstellt am: **27.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692994>

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MARK TWAIN THE ALPINIST

by Paul Martinet

The conquest of the Matterhorn has been inspiration for a number of writers, both past and present, in Switzerland and abroad. One of these was Mark Twain. In our opinion, this great writer has acquired, over the years a somewhat one-sided reputation. All too often people think of him exclusively as a humorist, and although his sense of the funny is indeed extremely good, he deserves our close attention for his great gifts of observation and analysis. Both are abundantly evident in two of his works "Innocents Abroad" and "A Tramp Abroad" neither of which is very well known in Europe.

The first of these is devoted to Mark Twain's discovery of a Europe that was wide open to journalists, and of a Middle East with colour enough and to spare. His "A Tramp Abroad" deals with Germany and Switzerland. The edition we have before us at this writing was printed in 1880. It is a book one can read with great pleasure in every sense of the word.

Switzerland takes up the greater part in this book of discovery of nooks and corners, some classic and some unknown. Occasionally the author's descriptions take on the giant proportions of the sensational reportages of our day — with this difference that Samuel L. Clemens, otherwise known as Mark Twain, did not take recourse to easy clichés. Space does not allow us to deal here with all the chapters of the author's tour through Switzerland's Alps and valleys and his extensive treatment of the length and breadth of the country, its customs, its dialects, its attractions and the temper of its people. Even yodelling — how could it be otherwise! — finds its place in the narrative of the generous humorist.

But let's take a look at the region of Zermatt which proved so attractive to Mark Twain. He had made up his mind to scale a peak with all the style, pomp and circumstance of the famous British mountaineers of that day. Not feeling particularly inclined toward any of the great peaks of over 4,000 m. altitude, which were the favourite targets of alpinists worthy of the name, he set out to conquer Riffelberg which at that time was not yet linked by rail with Zermatt. His preparations took on the dimensions of a full scale Himalayan expedition and were painstaking in the extreme. In every way, the author's humour is equal to the experience. First he set about recruiting personnel. Merely to list the people involved took up an entire page. Included were seventeen guides, four surgeons, three ministers, fifteen bar-keepers, a Latin scholar, a geologist, a botanist — and various *maîtres d'hôtel*. And lower down on the list we find a veterinary, twelve wine butlers, a hairdresser, four pastry makers and about thirty porters and mule drivers. In all, some fifty animals — cows and mules — were rounded up to accompany the 152 men recruited by Mr. Harris, Mark Twain's constant companion in his travels. Equally long, was his list of supplies, including as it did, 2,000 cigars, twenty-two barrels of whisky, sixteen cans of ham, some 100 ice axes, not to mention dynamite, mattresses, umbrellas and other similarly indispensable items. Leaving the Hotel Monte Rosa about four in the afternoon, the expedition stretched out in a column a half mile long, headed up by Mark Twain himself, radiating confidence, and flanked by five personal guides. Naturally, all the members of the caravan were roped together. The speed

of the march being slower than the author's spirit, the first stop was made at Winkelmatten where the expedition pitched its tents.

At two the next morning, the party got under way again, moving into a dense forest of larches as gloomy and forbidding as a jungle. As the leaders rounded a bend, an enormous boulder loomed up suddenly. A wave of hesitation and murmuring swept through the column. At this juncture Mark Twain took the floor, reminding his hearers of their glorious mountaineering tradition, thus succeeding in keeping rebellious spirits within the fold. The second night found the expedition camping out again.

One after the other, all kinds of obstacles arose, only to be overcome in truly heroic fashion, the narrative and the author's "tall tales" sometime taking on spectacular proportions yet always remaining pleasant and enjoyable. It took the party seven days to reach the Gornergrat, climbing via Riffelberg. The author blames up in fury at the time-table given by Baedekar who makes it seem so simple and easy to reach the summit. A few pages further on he takes Baedeker's publishers to task again for not indicating the speed of the Gornergrat Glacier: One inch per day!

These Europeans are definitely behind the times! At this rate, 500 years to get back to Zermatt! Better go back on foot than to use this type of frigid transportation . . . The scientists in the expedition are called upon for their contribution after the botanist has discovered edelweiss and rhododendrons at every turn.

Sandwiched between two humorous sallies, Mark Twain takes time to contemplate all the things that are worth seeing and admiring — so much alive and so brilliant in this glorious panorama of nature — even in what was then called the "bad season", because in those days it was not within everyone's financial reach.

Back at Zermatt again, the author was received with enthusiasm by the population and the authorities. His tremendous performance was duly recorded on a parchment scroll. Our visualisation of the event is aided equally by our imagination and sketches by artists of the period. The latter have indeed made, throughout the entire book, a great contribution to reader enjoyment.

Whymper's narrative, after the catastrophe of 14th July 1865, is reproduced further on without commentary and in an appropriate tone.

(*Swiss National Tourist office.*)

LAKE LEMAN

Fair Lake, though half-a-continent divide,
Though poetry may lose her stride
And verse grow stale,
Yet would I unashamed thy brightness hail
O'er plain and alp on Europe's mighty chart.
Léman, scorn not an outworn pen!
Belov'd, acclaimed, of universal destiny a part,
Thy brilliant waters nourish the life of men,
Their loveliness ingraft in music and art.
So let me steal again on that charmed scene,
Watch the intrepid dawn
Making by lofty pass for Clarens shore,
Scent the curt green on Pléiades ancient hill
And hear the sombre alphorn call once more.

E.F.I.