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978-1-108-06544-3 - A Tour in Switzerland: Or, a View of the Present State of the Governments and Manners of those Cantons: With Comparative Sketches of the Present State of Paris: Volume 2

Helen Maria Williams

Excerpt

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A TOUR  
IN  
*SWITZERLAND*;  
OR,  
A VIEW OF THE PRESENT STATE, &c.

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CHAPTER XXII.

*Ascent to the Glaciers.—Mountain-Prospeets.—Hymn  
written among the Alps.*

FROM a little village situated at the foot of the Glaciers, and near the source of the Rhine, we departed early the next morning to scale the mountain that led us to that mighty store-house of winter. Our road lay along the side of a torrent, part of which is applied to the purpose of turning the mill belonging to the hamlet, and watering the little enclosures around it. A path-way had been

VOL. II.

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formed

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## 2 A VIEW OF THE PRESENT

formed by the people across the Glaciers, in order to communicate with the inhabitants of the upper part of the valley of Ragantz.

The mountain, like those we had just left in the middle region, on the southern side of St. Bernardin, produced a fine short grass; and the peasants were spreading as we passed their scented harvest, to the pleasant, but fleeting sun-beam, eager to improve the precarious blessing, and snatch the golden moments! Along a fine amphitheatre of mountains, we spied the inhabitants of the various cottages at this pastoral employment, hanging on the steeps like goats, to turn the swath, and leaving us to wonder by what ingenuity the grass was first mowed. These *chalets*, or mountain cabins, are fitted for the region where they are placed, though of an order of architecture

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## STATE OF SWITZERLAND. 3

of which Palladio gives no description. They are in general built with the wood of the pine, or the larch, but when not in the neighbourhood of forests, are erected with stone. To most of the chalets the mountain itself affords one side ready constructed, as they are usually placed in such situations that when the avalanche rolls from the top, it shall find no resistance from those habitations, shielded by the friendly hill that rises abrupt behind, but passing harmless over the sheltered dwelling, fling at a safe distance its destructive mass.

In the last of these chalets we stopped to repose ourselves, though we had halted so often to botanize, as the hills abounded in a rich variety of herbs and delicate mountain-flowers, that we had hitherto suffered little from the labor of the ascent but our ramble, together with the

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#### 4 A VIEW OF THE PRESENT

morning breeze of the mountains, had created no usual appetite; and we sat down to a repast of dried fruits, and coffee, before the door of the chalet, to prepare us for the remainder of our enterprise.

The ascent to the Glaciers on the opposite side of the valley appeared so romantic, that we regretted for a moment that we had not taken a route, which seemed not only pleasanter, but shorter; our mountain companions, however, silenced our murmurs by assuring us that every step we took, though apparently leading us further from the opposite mountain, would at length bring us nearer. We had been so often deceived in our ideas of distances in the Alps, which it requires long usage and a mountain-eye to calculate accurately, that we gave up our reason to the care of these  
Grifons,

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STATE OF SWITZERLAND. 5

Grifons, persuaded that some mountain-miracle would be wrought in our favor.

The latter part of our journey was extreme toil; at some distance from the top, the mule which had hitherto carried me was left tied to a rock, and our guides supported me up the rugged steep; my fellow travellers, who were furnished with crampons, little machines buckled to the feet, with points to enable the wearer to keep his hold, purchased their security by excessive fatigue from wearing them.

We were frequently overcome by the extreme heat, as well as by the difficulty of the path, and often stopped to cool our fever at the torrent which we saw bursting above, from its icy source. No inconvenience, we were told, resulted from taking this cooling draught; though far from being convinced of the truth of this

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## 6 A VIEW OF THE PRESENT

assertion, we were glad to find an excuse in the example of our Grison companions, for quaffing this delicious beverage; and, like our first parent, “when not deceiv’d, but fondly overcome,” he tasted “of that fair, enticing fruit,” so we, against our better knowledge, scrupled not to drink large libations of this tempting nectarious water.

With an inexpressible sensation of fatigue like the giddiness of delirium breathless, and burning with heat, we threw ourselves, some time after mid-day, on the grass, along the icy boundary, from whose base rushed the torrent whence we gathered the icicles that again slackened our excessive thirst. These feelings of parched heat were not the effects of fatigue; we had taken as violent exercise beneath the hot noon-tide rays in the Italian vallies, with less feverish

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## STATE OF SWITZERLAND. 7

feverish sensations than we now experienced in those regions of winter. After a slight interval of repose, however, we found ourselves restored to that feeling of serene, tranquil delight, for which the philosophers who have written on the theory of the Higher Alps, account, from the purity of the atmosphere at that immense elevation; and which state of soothing happiness Rousseau has described with his usual eloquence, in a letter to Julia\*

While

\* The general impression felt by those who scale the higher mountains, where the air is pure and subtle, is a greater easiness in breathing, more lightness in the body, and more serenity in the mind.—Meditation assumes, in those regions, something of a character great, and sublime, proportioned to the objects which strike us; something of tranquil rapture, remote from all that is selfish, or sensual. It seems as if, while raised above the haunts of men, we leave below all mean and earthly sentiments, and that, as we approach the ethereal regions, the soul contracts some-

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## 8 A VIEW OF THE PRESENT

While my fellow travellers amused themselves by wandering over that world of ice, a difficult and dangerous enterprise, I sat down on the border of the Glacier, to enjoy the new and magnificent vision around me. On the right, rocks and mountains of ice, arose in dread and sublime perspective; before me, St. Bernardin lifted its barren and uncovered top; and nearly in the same direction, the eye wanders over a chain of Glaciers which separates the valley of the Rhine from the subject countries of the Grisons, Bormeo, and the Valteline. These were the Glaciers which, mid-way, we regretted not having scaled, and which our guides told us we should reach sooner

thing of their unchangeable purity. Upon the whole, this spectacle has something in it of magic and supernatural, which overwhelms the mind and senses; we forget every thing, we forget ourselves, and have scarcely a consciousness of existence.

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## STATE OF SWITZERLAND. 9

in the direction we had already taken. So far as we might trust to the testimony of our senses, they were not mistaken. These Glaciers appeared to touch that on which we were now placed; and it seemed as if we had only to descend a little from our present elevation, in order to climb the savage and naked pyramids of rocks which raised themselves up from the far-spread desert of ice, like barren islands from a troubled sea. We were, however, separated from those objects by a space of several miles, measured on the ground; but the intervening gulph was hid from our sight by the swell of the mountains. On the left, the eye was borne over the amphitheatre of hills, green with pasturage, up to the ridge of ice, stretching along its own fullen, and perhaps incroaching boundary. The cattle were cropping the herbage on the steep, and the chamois bounding over the rocks, for

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## 10      A VIEW OF THE PRESENT

for such the Grifon-peasant told me were a few playful animals I perceived at a great distance at the edge of the Glacier, over which my fellow-travellers were wandering. I employed the hours of meditation in throwing together the new images with which the Alpine scenery had filled my mind, into the form of an hymn, to the author of nature; and no spot can surely be more congenial to devotional feelings, than that theatre where the divinity has displayed the most stupendous of his earthly works.

The lengthening shadow of the icy-wall at the foot of which I was sitting, drew me from my meditations, and I began to be seriously alarmed at the absence of my friends. The opposite Glaciers were now lighted up with that glowing rose-coloured hue, with  
which