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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Gogol Busch  
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# **Sketches and Studies in Italy and Greece, First Series**

John Addington Symonds

# Imprint

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## PREFATORY NOTE

In preparing this new edition of the late J.A. Symonds's three volumes of travels, 'Sketches in Italy and Greece,' 'Sketches and Studies in Italy,' and 'Italian Byways,' nothing has been changed except the order of the Essays. For the convenience of travellers a topographical arrangement has been adopted. This implied a new title to cover the contents of all three volumes, and 'Sketches and Studies in Italy and Greece' has been chosen as departing least from the author's own phraseology.

HORATIO F. BROWN.

Venice: *June* 1898.



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## SKETCHES AND STUDIES IN ITALY AND GREECE

### *THE LOVE OF THE ALPS* [1]

Of all the joys in life, none is greater than the joy of arriving on the outskirts of Switzerland at the end of a long dusty day's journey from Paris. The true epicure in refined pleasures will never travel to Basle by night. He courts the heat of the sun and the monotony of French plains,—their sluggish streams and never-ending poplar trees—for the sake of the evening coolness and the gradual approach to the great Alps, which await him at the close of the day. It is about Mulhausen that he begins to feel a change in the landscape. The fields broaden into rolling downs, watered by clear and running streams; the green Swiss thistle grows by riverside and cowshed; pines begin to tuft the slopes of gently rising hills; and now the sun has set, the stars come out, first Hesper, then the troop of lesser lights; and he feels—yes, indeed, there is now no mistake—the well-known, well-loved magical fresh air, that never fails to blow from snowy mountains and meadows watered by perennial streams. The last hour is one of exquisite enjoyment, and when he reaches Basle, he scarcely sleeps all night for hearing the swift Rhine beneath the balconies, and knowing that the moon is shining on its waters, through the town, beneath the bridges, between pasturelands and copses, up the still mountain-girdled valleys to the ice-caves where the water springs. There is nothing in all experience of travelling like this. We may greet the Mediterranean at Marseilles with enthusiasm; on entering Rome by the Porta del Popolo, we may reflect with pride that we have reached the goal of our pil-

grimace, and are at last among world-shaking memories. But neither Rome nor the Riviera wins our hearts like Switzerland. We do not lie awake in London thinking of them; we do not long so intensely, as the year comes round, to revisit them. Our affection is less a passion than that which we cherish for Switzerland.

Why, then, is this? What, after all, is the love of the Alps, and when and where did it begin? It is easier to ask these questions than to answer them. The classic nations hated mountains. Greek and Roman poets talk of them with disgust and dread. Nothing could have been more depressing to a courtier of Augustus than residence at Aosta, even though he found his theatres and triumphal arches there. Wherever classical feeling has predominated, this has been the case. Cellini's Memoirs, written in the height of pagan Renaissance, well express the aversion which a Florentine or Roman felt for the inhospitable wildernesses of Switzerland. [2] Dryden, in his dedication to 'The Indian Emperor,' says, 'High objects, it is true, attract the sight; but it looks up with pain on craggy rocks and barren mountains, and continues not intent on any object which is wanting in shades and green to entertain it.' Addison and Gray had no better epithets than 'rugged,' 'horrid,' and the like for Alpine landscape. The classic spirit was adverse to enthusiasm for mere nature. Humanity was too prominent, and city life absorbed all interests,—not to speak of what perhaps is the weightiest reason—that solitude, indifferent accommodation, and imperfect means of travelling, rendered mountainous countries peculiarly disagreeable. It is impossible to enjoy art or nature while suffering from fatigue and cold, dreading the attacks of robbers, and wondering whether you will find food and shelter at the end of your day's journey. Nor was it different in the Middle Ages. Then individuals had either no leisure from war or strife with the elements, or else they devoted themselves to the salvation of their souls. But when the ideas of the Middle Ages had decayed, when improved arts of life had freed men from servile subjection to daily needs, when the bondage of religious tyranny had been thrown off and political liberty allowed the full development of tastes and instincts, when, moreover, the classical traditions had lost their power, and courts and coteries became too narrow for the activity of man,—then suddenly it was discovered that Nature in herself possessed transcendent charms. It

may seem absurd to class them all together; yet there is no doubt that the French Revolution, the criticism of the Bible, Pantheistic forms of religious feeling, landscape-painting, Alpine travelling, and the poetry of Nature, are all signs of the same movement—of a new Renaissance. Limitations of every sort have been shaken off during the last century; all forms have been destroyed, all questions asked. The classical spirit loved to arrange, model, preserve traditions, obey laws. We are intolerant of everything that is not simple, unbiassed by prescription, liberal as the wind, and natural as the mountain crags. We go to feed this spirit of freedom among the Alps. What the virgin forests of America are to the Americans, the Alps are to us. What there is in these huge blocks and walls of granite crowned with ice that fascinates us, it is hard to analyse. Why, seeing that we find them so attractive, they should have repelled our ancestors of the fourth generation and all the world before them, is another mystery. We cannot explain what rapport there is between our human souls and these inequalities in the surface of the earth which we call Alps. Tennyson speaks of

Some vague emotion of delight

In gazing up an Alpine height,

and its vagueness eludes definition. The interest which physical science has created for natural objects has something to do with it. Curiosity and the charm of novelty increase this interest. No towns, no cultivated tracts of Europe however beautiful, form such a contrast to our London life as Switzerland. Then there is the health and joy that comes from exercise in open air; the senses freshened by good sleep; the blood quickened by a lighter and rarer atmosphere. Our modes of life, the breaking down of class privileges, the extension of education, which contribute to make the individual greater and society less, render the solitude of mountains refreshing. Facilities of travelling and improved accommodation leave us free to enjoy the natural beauty which we seek. Our minds, too, are prepared to sympathise with the inanimate world; we have learned to look on the universe as a whole, and ourselves as a part of it, related by close ties of friendship to all its other members Shelley's, Wordsworth's, Goethe's poetry has taught us this; we are all more

or less Pantheists, worshippers of 'God in Nature,' convinced of the omnipresence of the informing mind.

Thus, when we admire the Alps, we are after all but children of the century. We follow its inspiration blindly; and while we think ourselves spontaneous in our ecstasy, perform the part for which we have been trained from childhood by the atmosphere in which we live. It is this very unconsciousness and universality of the impulse we obey which makes it hard to analyse. Contemporary history is difficult to write; to define the spirit of the age in which we live is still more difficult; to account for 'impressions which owe all their force to their identity with themselves' is most difficult of all. We must be content to feel, and not to analyse.

Rousseau has the credit of having invented the love of Nature. Perhaps he first expressed, in literature, the pleasures of open life among the mountains, of walking tours, of the '*école buissonnière*,' away from courts, and schools, and cities, which it is the fashion now to love. His bourgeois birth and tastes, his peculiar religious and social views, his intense self-engrossment,—all favoured the development of Nature-worship. But Rousseau was not alone, nor yet creative, in this instance. He was but one of the earliest to seize and express a new idea of growing humanity. For those who seem to be the most original in their inauguration of periods are only such as have been favourably placed by birth and education to imbibe the floating creeds of the whole race. They resemble the first cases of an epidemic, which become the centres of infection and propagate disease. At the time of Rousseau's greatness the French people were initiative. In politics, in literature, in fashions, and in philosophy, they had for some time led the taste of Europe. But the sentiment which first received a clear and powerful expression in the works of Rousseau, soon declared itself in the arts and literature of other nations. Goethe, Wordsworth, and the earlier landscape-painters, proved that Germany and England were not far behind the French. In England this love of Nature for its own sake is indigenous, and has at all times been peculiarly characteristic of our genius. Therefore it is not surprising that our life and literature and art have been foremost in developing the sentiment of which we are speaking. Our poets, painters, and prose writers gave the tone to European thought in this respect. Our travellers in search of the

adventurous and picturesque, our Alpine Club, have made of Switzerland an English playground.

The greatest period in our history was but a foreshadowing of this. To return to Nature-worship was but to reassume the habits of the Elizabethan age, altered indeed by all the changes of religion, politics, society, and science which the last three centuries have wrought, yet still, in its original love of free open life among the fields and woods, and on the sea, the same. Now the French national genius is classical. It reverts to the age of Louis XIV., and Rousseauism in their literature is as true an innovation and parenthesis as Pope-and-Drydenism was in ours. As in the age of the Reformation, so in this, the German element of the modern character predominates. During the two centuries from which we have emerged, the Latin element had the upper hand. Our love of the Alps is a Gothic, a Teutonic, instinct; sympathetic with all that is vague, infinite, and insubordinate to rules, at war with all that is defined and systematic in our genius. This we may perceive in individuals as well as in the broader aspects of arts and literatures. The classically minded man, the reader of Latin poets, the lover of brilliant conversation, the frequenter of clubs and drawing-rooms, nice in his personal requirements, scrupulous in his choice of words, averse to unnecessary physical exertion, preferring town to country life, *cannot* deeply feel the charm of the Alps. Such a man will dislike German art, and however much he may strive to be Catholic in his tastes, will find as he grows older that his liking for Gothic architecture and modern painting diminish almost to aversion before an increasing admiration for Greek peristyles and the Medicean Venus. If in respect of speculation all men are either Platonists or Aristotelians, in respect of taste all men are either Greek or German.

At present the German, the indefinite, the natural, commands; the Greek, the finite, the cultivated, is in abeyance. We who talk so much about the feeling of the Alps, are creatures, not creators of our *cultus*, — a strange reflection, proving how much greater man is than men, the common reason of the age in which we live than our own reasons, its constituents and subjects.

Perhaps it is our modern tendency to 'individualism' which makes the Alps so much to us. Society is there reduced to a vanish-

ing point—no claims are made on human sympathies—there is no need to toil in yoke-service with our fellows. We may be alone, dream our own dreams, and sound the depths of personality without the reproach of selfishness, without a restless wish to join in action or money-making or the pursuit of fame. To habitual residents among the Alps this absence of social duties and advantages may be barbarising, even brutalising. But to men wearied with too much civilisation, and deafened by the noise of great cities, it is beyond measure refreshing. Then, again, among the mountains history finds no place. The Alps have no past nor present nor future. The human beings who live upon their sides are at odds with nature, clinging on for bare existence to the soil, sheltering themselves beneath protecting rocks from avalanches, damming up destructive streams, all but annihilated every spring. Man, who is paramount in the plain, is nothing here. His arts and sciences, and dynasties, and modes of life, and mighty works, and conquests and decays, demand our whole attention in Italy or Egypt. But here the mountains, immemorably the same, which were, which are, and which are to be, present a theatre on which the soul breathes freely and feels herself alone. Around her on all sides is God, and Nature, who is here the face of God and not the slave of man. The spirit of the world hath here not yet grown old. She is as young as on the first day; and the Alps are a symbol of the self-creating, self-sufficing, self-enjoying universe which lives for its own ends. For why do the slopes gleam with flowers, and the hillsides deck themselves with grass, and the inaccessible ledges of black rock bear their tufts of crimson primroses and flaunting tiger-lilies? Why, morning after morning, does the red dawn flush the pinnacles of Monte Rosa above cloud and mist unheeded? Why does the torrent shout, the avalanche reply in thunder to the music of the sun, the trees and rocks and meadows cry their 'Holy, Holy, Holy'? Surely not for us. We are an accident here, and even the few men whose eyes are fixed habitually upon these things are dead to them—the peasants do not even know the names of their own flowers, and sigh with envy when you tell them of the plains of Lincolnshire or Russian steppes.

But indeed there is something awful in the Alpine elevation above human things. We do not love Switzerland merely because

we associate its thought with recollections of holidays and joyfulness. Some of the most solemn moments of life are spent high up above among the mountains, on the barren tops of rocky passes, where the soul has seemed to hear in solitude a low controlling voice. It is almost necessary for the development of our deepest affections that some sad and sombre moments should be interchanged with hours of merriment and elasticity. It is this variety in the woof of daily life which endears our home to us; and perhaps none have fully loved the Alps who have not spent some days of meditation, or it may be of sorrow, among their solitudes. Splendid scenery, like music, has the power to make 'of grief itself a fiery chariot for mounting above the sources of grief,' to ennoble and refine our passions, and to teach us that our lives are merely moments in the years of the eternal Being. There are many, perhaps, who, within sight of some great scene among the Alps, upon the height of the Stelvio or the slopes of Mürren, or at night in the valley of Courmayeur, have felt themselves raised above cares and doubts and miseries by the mere recognition of unchangeable magnificence; have found a deep peace in the sense of their own nothingness. It is not granted to us everyday to stand upon these pinnacles of rest and faith above the world. But having once stood there, how can we forget the station? How can we fail, amid the tumult of our common cares, to feel at times the hush of that far-off tranquillity? When our life is most commonplace, when we are ill or weary in city streets, we can remember the clouds upon the mountains we have seen, the sound of innumerable waterfalls, and the scent of countless flowers. A photograph of Bisson's or of Braun's, the name of some well-known valley, the picture of some Alpine plant, rouses the sacred hunger in our souls, and stirs again the faith in beauty and in rest beyond ourselves which no man can take from us. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to everything which enables us to rise above depressing and enslaving circumstances, which brings us nearer in some way or other to what is eternal in the universe, and which makes us know that, whether we live or die, suffer or enjoy, life and gladness are still strong in the world. On this account, the proper attitude of the soul among the Alps is one of silence. It is almost impossible without a kind of impiety to frame in words the feelings they inspire. Yet there are some sayings, hallowed by long usage, which throng the mind through a whole summer's day, and

seem in harmony with its emotions – some portions of the Psalms or lines of greatest poets, inarticulate hymns of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, waifs and strays not always apposite, but linked by strong and subtle chains of feeling with the grandeur of the mountains. This reverential feeling for the Alps is connected with the Pantheistic form of our religious sentiments to which I have before alluded. It is a trite remark, that even devout men of the present generation prefer temples *not* made with hands to churches, and worship God in the fields more contentedly than in their pews. What Mr. Ruskin calls 'the instinctive sense of the divine presence not formed into distinct belief' lies at the root of our profound veneration for the nobler aspects of mountain scenery. This instinctive sense has been very variously expressed by Goethe in Faust's celebrated confession of faith, by Shelley in the stanzas of 'Adonais,' which begin 'He is made one with nature,' by Wordsworth in the lines on Tintern Abbey, and lately by Mr. Roden Noel in his noble poems of Pantheism. It is more or less strongly felt by all who have recognised the indubitable fact that religious belief is undergoing a sure process of change from the dogmatic distinctness of the past to some at present dimly descried creed of the future. Such periods of transition are of necessity full of discomfort, doubt, and anxiety, vague, variable, and unsatisfying. The men in whose spirits the fermentation of the change is felt, who have abandoned their old moorings, and have not yet reached the haven for which they are steering, cannot but be indistinct and undecided in their faith. The universe of which they form a part becomes important to them in its infinite immensity. The principles of beauty, goodness, order and law, no longer connected in their minds with definite articles of faith, find symbols in the outer world. They are glad to fly at certain moments from mankind and its oppressive problems, for which religion no longer provides a satisfactory solution, to Nature, where they vaguely localise the spirit that broods over us controlling all our being. To such men Goethe's hymn is a form of faith, and born of such a mood are the following far humbler verses: –

At Mürren let the morning lead thee out  
To walk upon the cold and cloven hills,  
To hear the congregated mountains shout

Their pæan of a thousand foaming rills.  
Raimented with intolerable light  
The snow-peaks stand above thee, row on row  
Arising, each a seraph in his might;  
An organ each of varied stop doth blow.  
Heaven's azure dome trembles through all her spheres,  
Feeling that music vibrate; and the sun  
Raises his tenor as he upward steers,  
And all the glory-coated mists that run  
Below him in the valley, hear his voice,  
And cry unto the dewy fields, Rejoice!

There is a profound sympathy between music and fine scenery: they both affect us in the same way, stirring strong but undefined emotions, which express themselves in 'idle tears,' or evoking thoughts 'which lie,' as Wordsworth says, 'too deep for tears,' beyond the reach of any words. How little we know what multitudes of mingling reminiscences, held in solution by the mind, and colouring its fancy with the iridescence of variable hues, go to make up the sentiments which music or which mountains stir! It is the very vagueness, changefulness, and dreamlike indistinctness of these feelings which cause their charm; they harmonise with the haziness of our beliefs and seem to make our very doubts melodious. For this reason it is obvious that unrestrained indulgence in the pleasures of music or of scenery may tend to destroy habits of clear thinking, sentimentalise the mind, and render it more apt to entertain embryonic fancies than to bring ideas to definite perfection.

If hours of thoughtfulness and seclusion are necessary to the development of a true love for the Alps, it is no less essential to a right understanding of their beauty that we should pass some wet and gloomy days among the mountains. The unclouded sunsets and sunrises which often follow one another in September in the Alps, have something terrible. They produce a satiety of splendour, and

oppress the mind with a sense of perpetuity. I remember spending such a season in one of the Oberland valleys, high up above the pine-trees, in a little *châlet*. Morning after morning I awoke to see the sunbeams glittering on the Eiger and the Jungfrau; noon after noon the snow-fields blazed beneath a steady fire; evening after evening they shone like beacons in the red light of the setting sun. Then peak by peak they lost the glow; the soul passed from them, and they stood pale yet weirdly garish against the darkened sky. The stars came out, the moon shone, but not a cloud sailed over the untroubled heavens. Thus day after day for several weeks there was no change, till I was seized with an overpowering horror of unbroken calm. I left the valley for a time; and when I returned to it in wind and rain, I found that the partial veiling of the mountain heights restored the charm which I had lost and made me feel once more at home. The landscape takes a graver tone beneath the mist that hides the higher peaks, and comes drifting, creeping, feeling, through the pines upon their slopes – white, silent, blinding vapour-wreaths around the sable spires. Sometimes the cloud descends and blots out everything. Again it lifts a little, showing cottages and distant Alps beneath its skirts. Then it sweeps over the whole valley like a veil, just broken here and there above a lonely *châlet* or a thread of distant dangling torrent foam. Sounds, too, beneath the mist are more strange. The torrent seems to have a hoarser voice and grinds the stones more passionately against its boulders. The cry of shepherds through the fog suggests the loneliness and danger of the hills. The bleating of penned sheep or goats, and the tinkling of the cowbells, are mysteriously distant and yet distinct in the dull dead air. Then, again, how immeasurably high above our heads appear the domes and peaks of snow revealed through chasms in the drifting cloud; how desolate the glaciers and the avalanches in gleams of light that struggle through the mist! There is a leaden glare peculiar to clouds, which makes the snow and ice more lurid. Not far from the house where I am writing, the avalanche that swept away the bridge last winter is lying now, dripping away, dank and dirty, like a rotting whale. I can see it from my window, green beech-boughs nodding over it, forlorn larches bending their tattered branches by its side, splinters of broken pine protruding from its muddy caves, the boulders on its flank, and the hoarse hungry torrent tossing up its tongues to lick the ragged edge of

snow. Close by, the meadows, spangled with yellow flowers and red and blue, look even more brilliant than if the sun were shining on them. Every cup and blade of grass is drinking. But the scene changes; the mist has turned into rain-clouds, and the steady rain drips down, incessant, blotting out the view. Then, too, what a joy it is if the clouds break towards evening with a north wind, and a rainbow in the valley gives promise of a bright to-morrow! We look up to the cliffs above our heads, and see that they have just been powdered with the snow that is a sign of better weather.

Such rainy days ought to be spent in places like Seelisberg and Mürren, at the edge of precipices, in front of mountains, or above a lake. The cloud-masses crawl and tumble about the valleys like a brood of dragons; now creeping along the ledges of the rock with sinuous self-adjustment to its turns and twists; now launching out into the deep, repelled by battling winds, or driven onward in a coil of twisted and contorted serpent curls. In the midst of summer these wet seasons often end in a heavy fall of snow. You wake some morning to see the meadows which last night were gay with July flowers huddled up in snow a foot in depth. But fair weather does not tarry long to reappear. You put on your thickest boots and sally forth to find the great cups of the gentians full of snow, and to watch the rising of the cloud-wreaths under the hot sun. Bad dreams or sickly thoughts, dissipated by returning daylight or a friend's face, do not fly away more rapidly and pleasantly than those swift glory-coated mists that lose themselves we know not where in the blue depths of the sky.

In contrast with these rainy days nothing can be more perfect than clear moonlight nights. There is a terrace upon the roof of the inn at Courmayeur where one may spend hours in the silent watches, when all the world has gone to sleep beneath. The Mont Chétif and the Mont de la Saxe form a gigantic portal not unworthy of the pile that lies beyond. For Mont Blanc resembles a vast cathedral; its countless spires are scattered over a mass like that of the Duomo at Milan, rising into one tower at the end. By night the glaciers glitter in the steady moon; domes, pinnacles, and buttresses stand clear of clouds. Needles of every height and most fantastic shapes rise from the central ridge, some solitary, like sharp arrows shot against the sky, some clustering into sheaves. On every horn of snow and bank

of grassy hill stars sparkle, rising, setting, rolling round through the long silent night. Moonlight simplifies and softens the landscape. Colours become scarcely distinguishable, and forms, deprived of half their detail, gain in majesty and size. The mountains seem greater far by night than day—higher heights and deeper depths, more snowy pyramids, more beetling crags, softer meadows, and darker pines. The whole valley is hushed, but for the torrent and the chirping grasshopper and the striking of the village clocks. The black tower and the houses of Courmayeur in the foreground gleam beneath the moon until she reaches the edge of the Cramont, and then sinks quietly away, once more to reappear among the pines, then finally to leave the valley dark beneath the shadow of the mountain's bulk. Meanwhile the heights of snow still glitter in the steady light: they, too, will soon be dark, until the dawn breaks, tinging them with rose.

But it is not fair to dwell exclusively upon the more sombre aspect of Swiss beauty when there are so many lively scenes of which to speak. The sunlight and the freshness and the flowers of Alpine meadows form more than half the charm of Switzerland. The other day we walked to a pasture called the Col de Checruit, high up the valley of Courmayeur, where the spring was still in its first freshness. Gradually we climbed, by dusty roads and through hot fields where the grass had just been mown, beneath the fierce light of the morning sun. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the heavy pines hung overhead upon their crags, as if to fence the gorge from every wandering breeze. There is nothing more oppressive than these scorching sides of narrow rifts, shut in by woods and precipices. But suddenly the valley broadened, the pines and larches disappeared, and we found ourselves upon a wide green semicircle of the softest meadows. Little rills of water went rushing through them, rippling over pebbles, rustling under dock leaves, and eddying against their wooden barriers. Far and wide 'you scarce could see the grass for flowers,' while on every side the tinkling of cow-bells, and the voices of shepherds calling to one another from the Alps, or singing at their work, were borne across the fields. As we climbed we came into still fresher pastures, where the snow had scarcely melted. There the goats and cattle were collected, and the shepherds sat among them, fondling the kids and calling them by name. When