

## Three Men on the Bummel

*J.K.Jerome*

Match 19-22, 2014

The sequel to 'Three Men in a Boat' never really made it. In retrospect this is not too surprising. Although in many ways the present book is more hilarious than the former, the hilarity is a bit more contrived. Furthermore it lacks the cohesiveness of its predecessor, there is no unifying theme, such as the Thames, that flows through it. The author tries hard but the proper inspiration is missing. The adventures on the Thames are imbued with a certain romantic glow. The landscape through which the river gently penetrates is suffused with familiar names and historical associations going back not only to Tudor times but Anglo-Saxon infancy and maturity. The author also allows himself some word painting, ostensibly for reasons of parody, but the earnestness and enthusiasm of the author shines through. In the present book, however, the author explicitly disavows all such ambitions as being superfluous in the present age of ubiquitous imagery, and the result is that there is no longer any real sense of locality, everything becomes abstract and general. Furthermore, there is no longer any unity of transport, the protagonists embark on extensive train journeys as well as walking expeditions, in addition to the biking. Their compass of Germany is extensive, involving cities like Hanover, Berlin and Dresden, in addition to Stuttgart and Colmar. Not only excursions up and down the Black Forest, but also through the Vosges. However, as a document of its times, it is more useful and instructive than its predecessor, and the ruminations on politics and Germans are particularly interesting.

The English do not learn foreign languages, then as well as now. In fact by the stubborn resistance to them, the English traveller actually forces foreign people to learn English. The author, who does not seem above, along with his companions, to acquire at least a smattering of German, speculates whether English will become a world language. Its lack of grammatical sophistication, certainly works in its favor, on the other hand its lack of co-ordination between spelling and pronunciation may provide a serious stumbling block. The author makes fun of the language guides that are being published, and elaborates on it by writing a digressionary sketch on doing shopping in London armed with an English one, with predictable hilarity. We also are treated to the Englishman who knows German and French to perfection, but is unable to make understood in Alsace with either of them. How come? Patiently the alter ego of the author explains to him that his pronunciation and grammar is far too perfect to go well with natives. Just try to mispronounce as much as possible and make as many grammatical mistakes, which he may stomach, and the natives will take on a much more accommodating attitude. Jerome satirizes the technical advice on perfect pronunciation as being impossible to follow.

His description of the German national character written at the turn of the century is partly prophetic and rather apt. He makes fun of the German's orderliness and his love of regulation, from setting up birds nests in trees, to assigning uses to various paths and signs to regulate. It all works because the German is so obedient, in fact he cannot rule

himself, shows no initiative whatsoever, and looks up to the police as an angel. He also points out the German propensity for being a good example to the children, something I have myself encounter many times. The German, he concludes, cannot rule himself. He is very adept at being ruled and ruling others, and maybe the solution should be to make himself his own officer. In England it is very hard to set up mischief and be arrested by the police, in Germany on the other hand it is easy, whatever you do, you tend to transgress, and the Germans, as usual without any trace of humor, take transgressions very seriously. Still Germans are very well taken care of by its Government. It is as if the Government tells them that the only thing they have to do is to get born, then the Government will take care of the rest. This might be true, and Germany might very well be the first welfare state, many of its features being in place already at the last quarter of the 19th century, thanks to the farsightedness of a Bismarck. And Jerome agrees, the German are in general of a kindly temperament and they have a very benign government. In fact *Hitherto, the German has had the blessed fortune to be exceptionally well governed; if this continues, it will go well with him.* Indeed very prophetic, I would say. In short the English admires the Germans as well as making fun of them. This would change.

As to the trip itself, the ostensible subject of the book, as noted little of it comes through. There are some excursions in the Black Forest, a lengthy description of living in a Black Forest farm and being forced to get up very early in the morning due to all the commotion due to men and beast alike. In such a farm, you share quarters with pigs, cows, ducks and whatever. There is also some regret at the regulation of nature, of taming anything untamed, of channeling any unfettered river into straight paths, and above all to make a restaurant the ultimate destination for any excursion. In fact everywhere where there is a view or some other spectacular aspect of nature, there is sure to be a restaurant. How can you square the sublimity of a wild experience with the humdrum of beer and cutlets with sauerkraut? The hills of the Vosges turn out to be poorer than their counterparts across the Rhine, but abundant with fruits for the picking (but once they get into a private garden and comment happily on an old farmer approaching them merrily up a hill, waving his arms, and wielding what they first mistake for a walking stick, only to identify it as a gun, and hence making themselves immediately scarce). The charms of Dresden, at the time, one of the architectural wonders of Europe, are presented, without really adding any substance, as the author has disavowed any ambition of word painting. And of Berlin we get very little sense.

March 22, 2014 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se