

*Il passaggio sul Colle di Tenda descritto da:*

**Tobias Smollett**

*in*

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### **Letter XXXVIII**

To Dr. S\_\_\_\_\_ *at Nice*

**TURIN, March 18 1765.**

Dear Sir,

I am just returned from an excursion to Turin, wick is about thirty leagues from Nice, the greater part of the way lying over frightful mountains covered with snow. The difficulty of the road, however, reaches no farther than Coni, from whence there is an open highway through a fine plain country, as far as the capital of Piedmont, and the traveller is accommodated with chaise and horses to proceed either post, or by cambiatura, as in other parts of Italy. There are only two ways of performing the journey over the mountains from Nice; one is to ride a muleback, and the other to be carried in a chair. The former I chose, and set out with my servant on the seventh day of February at two in the afternoon. I was hardly clear of Nice, when it began to rain so hard that in less than an hour the mud was half a foot deep in many parts of the road. This was the only inconvenience we suffered, the way being in other respects practicable enough; for there is but one small hill to cross on this side of the village of L'Escarene, where we arrived about six in the evening. The ground in this neighbourhood is tolerably cultivated, and the mountains are planted to the tops with olive trees. The accommodation here is so very bad, that I had no inclination to be a bed longer than was absolutely necessary for refreshment; and therefore I proceeded on my journey at two in the morning, conducted by a guide, whom I hired for this purpose at the rate of three livres a day. Having ascended one side, and descended the other, of the mountain called Braus, which took up four hours, though the road is not bad, we at six reached the village of Sospello, which is agreeably situated in a small valley, surrounded by prodigious high and barren mountains. This little plain is pretty fertile, and being watered by a pleasant stream, forms a delightful contrast with the hideous rocks that surround it. Having reposed myself and my mules two hours at this place, we continued our journey over the second mountain, called Brovis, which is rather more considerable than the first, and in four hours arrived at La Giandola, a tolerable inn situated betwixt the high road and a small river, about a gunshot from the town of Brieglie, which we leave on the right. As we jogged along in the grey of the morning. I was a little startled at two figures which I saw before me, and began to put my pistols in order. It must be observed that these mountains are infested with contrabandiers, a set of smuggling peasants, very bold and desperate, who make a traffic of selling tobacco, salt, and other merchandize, which have not payed duty, and sometimes lay travellers under contribution. I did not doubt but there was a gang of these

freebooters at hand; but as no more than two persons appeared, I resolved to let them know we were prepared for defence, and fired one of my pistols, in hope that the report of it, echoed from the surrounding rocks, would produce a proper effect: but, the mountains and roads being entirely covered with snow to a considerable depth, there was little or no reverberation, and the sound was not louder than that of a pop-gun, although the piece contained a good charge of powder. Nevertheless, it did not fail to engage the attention of the strangers, one of whom immediately wheeled to the left about, and being by this time very near me, gave me an opportunity of contemplating his whole person. He was very tall, meagre, and yellow, with a long hooked nose, and small twinkling eyes. His head was eased in a woollen night-cap, over which he wore a flapped hat; he had a silk handkerchief about his neck, and his mouth was furnished with a short wooden pipe, from which he discharged wreathing clouds of tobacco-smoke. He was wrapped in a kind of capot of green bays, lined with wolfskin, had a pair of monstrous boots, quilted on the inside with cotton, was almost covered with dirt, and rode a mule so low that his long legs hung dangling within six inches of the ground. This grotesque figure was so much more ludicrous than terrible, that I could not help laughing; when, taking his pipe out of his mouth, he very politely accosted me by name.

You may easily guess I was exceedingly surprised at such an address on the top of the mountain Brovis: but he forthwith put an end to it too, by discovering himself to be the marquis M--, whom I had the honour to be acquainted with at Nice. After having rallied him upon his equipage, he gave me to understand he had set out from Nice the morning of the same day that I departed; that he was going to Turin, and that he had sent one of his servants before him to Coni with his baggage. Knowing him to be an agreeable companion, I was glad of this encounter, and we resolved to travel the rest of the way together. We dined at La Giandola, and in the afternoon rode along the little river Roida, which runs in a bottom between frightful precipices, and in several places forms natural cascades, the noise of which had well-nigh deprived us of the sense of hearing; after a winding course among these mountains, it discharges itself into the Mediterranean at Vintimiglia, in the territory of Genoa. As the snow did not lie on these mountains, when we cracked our whips, there was such a repercussion of the sound as is altogether inconceivable. We passed by the village of Saorgio, situated on an eminence, where there is a small fortress which commands the whole pass, and in five hours arrived at our inn, on this side the Col de Tende, where we took up our quarters, but had very little reason to boast of our entertainment. Our greatest difficulty, however, consisted in pulling off the marquis's boots, which were of the kind called Seafarot, by this time so loaded with dirt on the outside, and so swelled with the rain within, that he could neither drag them after him as he walked, nor disencumber his legs of them, without such violence as seemed almost sufficient to tear him limb from limb. In a word, we were obliged to tie a rope about his heel, and all the people in the house assisting to pull, the poor marquis was drawn from one end of the apartment to the other before the boot would give way: at last his legs were happily disengaged, and the machines carefully dried and stuffed for next day's journey.

We took our departure from hence at three in the morning, and at four, began to mount the Col de Tende, which is by far the highest mountain in the whole journey: it was now quite covered with snow, which at the top of it was near twenty feet thick. Half way up, there are quarters for a detachment of soldiers, posted here to prevent smuggling, and an inn called La Ca, which in the language of the country signifies the house. At this place, we hired six men to assist us in ascending the mountain, each of them provided with a kind of hough to break the ice, and make a sort of steps for the mules. When we were near the top, however, we were obliged to alight, and climb the mountain supported each by two of those men, called Coulants who walk upon the snow with great firmness and security. We were followed by the mules, and though they are very surefooted animals, and were frost-shod for the occasion, they stumbled and fell very often; the ice being so hard that the sharp-headed nails in their shoes could not penetrate. Having reached the top of this mountain, from whence there is no prospect but of other rocks and mountains, we

prepared for descending on the other side by the Leze, which is an occasional sledge made of two pieces of wood, carried up by the Coulants for this purpose. I did not much relish this kind of carriage, especially as the mountain was very steep, and covered with such a thick fog that we could hardly see two or three yards before us. Nevertheless, our guides were so confident, and my companion, who had passed the same way on other occasions, was so secure, that I ventured to place myself on this machine, one of the coulants standing behind me, and the other sitting before, as the conductor, with his feet paddling among the snow, in order to moderate the velocity of its descent. Thus accommodated, we descended the mountain with such rapidity, that in an hour we reached Limon, which is the native place of almost all the muleteers who transport merchandize from Nice to Coni and Turin. Here we waited full two hours for the mules, which travelled with the servants by the common road. To each of the coulants we paid forty sols, which are nearly equal to two shillings sterling. Leaving Limon, we were in two hours quite disengaged from the gorges of the mountains, which are partly covered with wood and pasturage, though altogether inaccessible, except in summer; but from the foot of the Col de Tende, the road lies through a plain all the way to Turin. We took six hours to travel from the inn where we had lodged over the mountain to Limon, and five hours from thence to Coni. Here we found our baggage, which we had sent off by the carriers one day before we departed from Nice; and here we dismissed our guides, together with the mules. In winter, you have a mule for this whole journey at the rate of twenty livres; and the guides are payed at the rate of two livres a day, reckoning six days, three for the journey to Coni, and three for their return to Nice. We set out so early in the morning in order to avoid the inconveniencies and dangers that attend the passage of this mountain. The first of these arises from your meeting with long strings of loaded mules in a slippery road, the breadth of which does not exceed a foot and an half. As it is altogether impossible for two mules to pass each other in such a narrow path, the muleteers have made doublings or elbows in different parts, and when the troops of mules meet, the least numerous is obliged to turn off into one of these doublings, and there halt until the others are past. Travellers, in order to avoid this disagreeable delay, which is the more vexatious, considering the excessive cold, begin the ascent of the mountain early in the morning before the mules quit their inns. But the great danger of travelling here when the sun is up, proceeds from what they call the Valanches. These are balls of snow detached from the mountains which over-top the road, either by the heat of the sun, or the humidity of the weather. A piece of snow thus loosened from the rock, though perhaps not above three or four feet in diameter, increases sometimes in its descent to such a degree, as to become two hundred paces in length, and rolls down with such rapidity, that the traveller is crushed to death before he can make three steps on the road. These dreadful heaps drag every thing along with them in their descent. They tear up huge trees by the roots, and if they chance to fall upon a house, demolish it to the foundation. Accidents of this nature seldom happen in the winter while the weather is dry; and yet scarce a year passes in which some mules and their drivers do not perish by the valanches. At Coni we found the countess C-- from Nice, who had made the same journey in a chair, carried by porters. This is no other than a common elbow-chair of wood, with a straw bottom, covered above with waxed cloth, to protect the traveller from the rain or snow, and provided with a foot-board upon which the feet rest.

It is carried like a sedan-chair; and for this purpose six or eight porters are employed at the rate of three or four livres a head per day, according to the season, allowing three days for their return. Of these six men, two are between the poles carrying like common chairmen, and each of these is supported by the other two, one at each hand: but as those in the middle sustain the greatest burthen, they are relieved by the others in a regular rotation. In descending the mountain, they carry the poles on their shoulders, and in that case, four men are employed, one at each end.

At Coni, you may have a chaise to go with the same horses to Turin, for which you pay fifteen livres, and are a day and a half on the way. You may post it, however, in one day, and then the price is seven livres ten sols per post, and ten sols to the postilion. The method we took was that of

cambiatura. This is a chaise with horses shifted at the same stages that are used in posting: but as it is supposed to move slower, we pay but five livres per post, and ten sols to the postilion. In order to quicken its pace, we gave ten sols extraordinary to each postilion, and for this gratification, he drove us even faster than the post. The chaises are like those of Italy, and will take on near two hundred weight of baggage.

Coni is situated between two small streams, and though neither very large nor populous, is considerable for the strength of its fortifications. It is honoured with the title of the Maiden-Fortress, because though several times besieged, it was never taken. The prince of Conti invested it in the war of 1744; but he was obliged to raise the siege, after having given battle to the king of Sardinia. The place was gallantly defended by the baron Leutrum, a German protestant, the best general in the Sardinian service: but what contributed most to the miscarriage of the enemy, was a long tract of heavy rains, which destroyed all their works, and rendered their advances impracticable.

I need not tell you that Piedmont is one of the most fertile and agreeable countries in Europe, and this the most agreeable part of all Piedmont, though it now appeared to disadvantage from the rigorous season of the year: I shall only observe that we passed through Sabellian, which is a considerable town, and arrived in the evening at Turin. We entered this fine city by the gate of Nice, and passing through the elegant Piazza di San Carlo, took up our quarters at the Bona Fama, which stands at one corner of the great square, called La Piazza Castel.

Were I even disposed to give a description of Turin, I should be obliged to postpone it till another opportunity, having no room at present to say any thing more, but that I am always

Yours.

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Qui di seguito viene riportata la traduzione (parziale), tratta dall'articolo di Eugenio Calvano "**Fantasia sul Colle di Tenda**" contenuto nella Rivista "Cuneo Provincia Granda" n. 3-1953.

*Vi sono soltanto due modi di compiere il viaggio per le montagne, da Nizza: l'una a dorso di mulo, l'altra facendosi portare in lettiga. Scelsi il primo e partii col mio servo il 7 febbraio (1765) alle due del pomeriggio. Appena fuori di Nizza cominció a piovere... il 9 febbraio alle tre del mattino partimmo da Tenda e cominciammo alle quattro l'ascensione del colle, che è di gran lunga la montagna più alta di tutto il viaggio. Era tutta coperta di neve, che alla sommità raggiungeva quasi venti piedi di altezza. A mezza strada della salita sono quartieri per un distaccamento di soldati, qui posti per prevenire il contrabbando, e un'osteria chiamata la "Cà", che nella lingua del paese significa la casa. In questo posto assoldammo sei uomini che ci assistessero nell'ascesa del monte, ognuno di essi provvisto di una specie di zappa per rompere il ghiaccio e fare gradini per i muli.*

*"Quando fumo vicini alla cima dovemmo però smontare ed arrampicarci per la montagna, aiutati ciascuno da due di questi uomini, chiamati "coulants", che marciano sopra la neve con grande fermezza e sicurezza. Eravamo seguiti dai muli, e sebbene questi fossero animali dal piede molto sicuro e ferrati per l'occasione, scivolavano e specialmente cadevano molto spesso, il ghiaccio essendo tanto duro che i chiodi acuti dei loro zoccoli non potevano penetrarvi. Raggiunta la cima della montagna dalla quale non si vedono che altre rocce e montagne, ci preparammo per discendere dall'altra parte con una "leze", che è una slitta improvvisata con due pezzi di legno portati su dai "coulants" a tale scopo.*

*Non presi molto gusto a questo mezzo di trasporto, specialmente perché la montagna era molto ripida e coperta da una nebbia tanto fitta, che appena potevamo vedere a due o tre metri davanti a noi. Tuttavia le nostre guide dimostravano una tale sicurezza e il mio compagno, che aveva fatto la stessa strada in altre occasioni, era così fiducioso, che mi arrischiavi a salire su questa macchina. Uno dei "coulants" si mise in*

*piedi dietro di me, e l'altro seduto avanti, quale conduttore, coi piedi puntati nella neve per moderare la velocità della discesa. Così accomodati, discendemmo la montagna con tale rapidità che in un'ora fummo a Limone, luogo nativo di quasi tutti i mulattieri che trasporta mercanzie da Nizza a Cuneo e Torino. Qui aspettammo due buone ore per i muli che seguivano coi servitori sul sentiero. Ad ognuno die "coulants" demmo quaranta soldi che equivalgono circa a due scellini...*

*Avevamo impiegato sei ore dall'osteria (La Cà) dove avevamo fatto sosta, fino a Limone, e impiegammo cinque ore da qui fino a Cuneo...*

*In Cuneo incontrammo una contessa che aveva fatto il medesimo viaggio in una lettiga recata da portatori. Questa non è che una comune sedia a braccioli, con un fondo di paglia, coperta di sopra con tela incerata, per riparare il viaggiatore da pioggia o neve, e munita di un appoggio per mettervi il piede. È trasportata come una portantina ordinaria, e a questo scopo sono impiegati sei od otto portatori, secondo la stagione, alla tariffa di quattro lire ciascuno per giorno, concedendo tre giorni per il ritorno. Di questi sei uomini, due camminano fra le stanghe, come per le lettighe ordinarie, e ognuno di essi è aiutato da altri due che gli stanno ai lati; ma siccome quelli in mezzo devono sostenere il carico maggiore, sono rilevati dagli altri a turni regolari. Nel discendere dalla montagna essi mettono le stanghe sulle spalle, e in tale caso s'impiegano quattro uomini, uno per ogni estremità..."*