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Playing Courier

MARK TWAIN

A TIME would come when we must go from Aix-les-Bains to Geneva, and from thence, by a series of day-long and tangled journeys, to Bayreuth in Bavaria. I should have to have a courier, of course, to take care of so considerable a party as mine.

But I procrastinated. The time slipped along, and at last I woke up one day to the fact that we were ready to move and had no courier. I then resolved upon what I felt was a fool-hardy thing, but I was in the humor of it. I said I would make the first stage without help—I did it.

I brought the party from Aix to Geneva by myself—four people. The distance was two hours and more, and there was one change of cars. There was not an accident of any kind, except leaving a valise and some other matters on the platform, a thing which can hardly be called an accident, it is so common. So I offered to conduct the party all the way to Bayreuth.

This was a blunder, though it did not seem so at the time. There was more detail than I thought there would be: 1. Two persons whom we had left in a Genevan pension some weeks before must be collected and brought to the hotel; 2. I must notify the people on the Grand Quay who store trunks to bring seven of our stored trunks to the hotel and carry back seven which they would find piled in the lobby; 3. I must find out what part of Europe Bayreuth was in, and buy seven railway tickets for that point; 4. I must send a telegram to a friend in the Netherlands; 5. It was now 2 o'clock in the afternoon and we must look sharp and be ready for the first night train, and make sure of sleeping-car tickets; 6. I must draw money at the bank.

It seemed to me that the sleeping-car tickets must be the most important thing, so I went to the station myself to make sure; hotel messengers are not always brisk people. It was a hot day, and I ought to have driven, but it seemed better economy to walk. It did not turn out so, because I lost my way and tumbled the distance. I applied for the tickets, and they asked me

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which route I wanted to go by, and that embarrassed me and made me lose my head, there were so many people standing around and I not knowing anything about the routes and not supposing there were going to be two; so I judged it best to go back and map out the road and come again.

I took a cab this time, but on my way up-stairs at the hotel I remembered that I was out of cigars, so I thought it would be well to get some while the matter was in my mind. It was only around the corner and I didn't need the cab. I asked the cabman to wait where he was. Thinking of the telegram and trying to word it in my head, I forgot the cigars and the cab, and walked on indefinitely. I was going to have the hotel people send the telegram, but as I could not be far from the postoffice by this time, I thought I would do it myself. But it was farther than I had supposed. I found the place at last and wrote the telegram and handed it in. The clerk was a severe-looking, fidgety man, and he began to fire French questions at me in such a liquid form that I could not detect the joints between his words, and this made me lose my head again. But an Englishman stepped up and said the clerk wanted to know where he was to send the telegram. I could not tell him, because it was not my telegram, and I explained that I was merely sending it for a member of my party. But nothing would pacify the clerk but the address, so I said that if he was so particular I would go back and get it.

However, I thought I would go and collect those lacking two persons first, for it would be best to do everything systematically and in order, and one detail at a time. Then I remembered the cab was eating up my substance down at the hotel yonder, so I called another cab and told the man to go down and fetch it to the postoffice and wait till I came.

I had a long hot walk to collect those people, and when I got there they couldn't come with me because they had heavy satchels and must have a cab. I went away to find one, but before I ran across any I noticed that I had reached the neighborhood of the Grand Quay—at least I thought I had—so I judged I could save time by stepping around and arranging about the trunks. I stepped around about a mile, and although I did not find the Grand Quay, I found a cigar shop and remembered about the cigars. I said I was going to Bayreuth, and

wanted enough for the journey. The man asked me which route I was going to take. I said I did not know. He said he would recommend me to go by Zurich and various other places which he named, and offered to sell me seven second-class through tickets for \$22 apiece, which would be throwing off the discount which the railroads allowed him. I was already tired of riding second-class on first-class tickets, so I took him up.

By and by I found Natural & Co.'s storage office, and told them to send seven of our trunks to the hotel and pile them up in the lobby. It seemed to me that I was not delivering the whole of the message, still it was all that I could find in my head.

Next I found the bank and asked for some money, but I had left my letter of credit somewhere and was not able to draw. I remembered now that I must have left it lying on the table where I wrote my telegram; so I got a cab and drove to the postoffice and went upstairs, and they said that a letter of credit had indeed been left on the table, but that it was now in the hands of the police authorities, and it would be necessary for me to go there and prove property. They sent a boy with me, and we went out the back way and walked a couple of miles and found the place; and then I remembered about my cabs, and asked the boy to send them to me when he got back to the postoffice. It was nightfall now, and the Mayor had gone to dinner. I thought I would go to dinner myself, but the officer on duty thought differently, and I stayed. The Mayor dropped in at half-past 10, but said it was too late to do anything to-night—come at 9:30 in the morning. The officer wanted to keep me all night, and said I was a suspicious-looking person and probably did not own the letter of credit, and didn't know what a letter of credit was, but merely saw the real owner leave it lying on the table, and wanted to get it because I was probably a person that would want anything he could get, whether it was valuable or not. But the Mayor said he saw nothing suspicious about me and that I seemed a harmless person and nothing the matter with me but a wandering mind, and not much of that. So I thanked him and he set me free, and I went home in my three cabs.

As I was dog-tired and in no condition to answer questions with discretion, I thought I would not disturb the Expedition

at that time of night, as there was a vacant room I knew of at the other end of the hall; but I did not quite arrive there, as a watch had been set, the expedition being anxious about me. I was placed in a galling situation. The Expedition sat stiff and forbidding on four chairs in a row, with shawls and things all on, satchels and guide-books in lap. They had been sitting like that for four hours, and the glass going down all the time. Yes, and they were waiting—waiting for me. It seemed to me that nothing but a sudden, happily contrived and brilliant tour de force could break this iron front and make a diversion in my favor; so I shied my hat into the arena, and followed it with a skip and a jump, shouting blithely:

“Ha, ha, here we all are, Mr. Merryman!”

Nothing could be deeper or stiller than the absence of applause which followed. But I kept on; there seemed no other way, though my confidence, poor enough before, had got a deadly check and was in effect gone.

I tried to be jocund out of a heavy heart, I tried to touch the other hearts there and soften the bitter resentment in those faces by throwing off bright and airy fun and making of the whole ghastly thing a joyously humorous incident, but this idea was not well conceived. It was not the right atmosphere for it. I got not one smile; not one line in those offended faces relaxed; I thawed nothing of the winter that looked out of those frosty eyes. I started one more breezy, poor effort, but the head of the Expedition cut into the center of it and said:

“Where have you been?”

I saw by the manner of this, that the idea was to get down to cold business, now. So I began my travels, but was cut short again.

“Where are the two others? We have been in frightful anxiety about them.”

“Oh, they’re all right. I was to fetch a cab. I will go straight off and——”

“Sit down! Don’t you know it is 11 o’clock? Where did you leave them?”

“At the pension.”

“Why didn’t you bring them?”

“Because we couldn’t carry the satchels. And so I thought——”

“Thought! You should not try to think. One cannot think without the proper machinery. It is two miles to that pension. Did you go there without a cab?”

“I—well, I didn’t intend to; it only happened so.”

“How did it happen so?”

“Because I was at the postoffice and I remembered that I had left a cab waiting here, and so, to stop that expense, I sent another cab to—to——”

“To what?”

“Well, I don’t remember now, but I think the new cab was to have the hotel pay the old cab, and send it away.”

“What good would that do?”

“What good would it do? It would stop the expense, wouldn’t it?”

“By putting the new cab in its place to continue the expense?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Why didn’t you have the new cab come back for you?”

“Oh, that is what I did. I remember now. Yes, that is what I did. Because I recollect that when I——”

“Well, then, why didn’t it come back for you?”

“To the Postoffice? Why, it did.”

“Very well, then, how did you come to walk to the pension?”

“I—I don’t quite remember how that happened. Oh, yes, I do remember, now. I wrote the dispatch to send to the Netherlands, and——”

“Oh, thank goodness, you did accomplish something! I wouldn’t have had you fail to send—what makes you look like that! You are trying to avoid my eye. That dispatch is the most important thing that—You haven’t sent that dispatch!”

“I haven’t said I didn’t send it.”

“You don’t need to. Oh, dear, I wouldn’t have had that telegram fail for anything. Why didn’t you send it?”

“Well, you see, with so many things to do and think of, I—they’re very particular there, and after I had written the telegram——”

“Oh, never mind, let it go; explanations can’t help the matter now—what will he think of us?”

“Oh, that’s all right, that’s all right; he’ll think we gave the telegram to the hotel people and that they——”

“Why, certainly! Why didn’t you do that? There was no other rational way.”

“Yes, I know; but then I had it on my mind that I must be sure and get to the bank and draw some money——”

“Well, you are entitled to some credit, after all, for thinking of that, and I don’t wish to be too hard on you, though you must acknowledge yourself that you have cost us all a good deal of trouble, and some of it not necessary. How much did you draw?”

“Well, I—I had an idea that—that——”

“That what?”

“That—well, it seems to me that in the circumstances—so many of us, you know, and—and——”

“What are you mooning about? Do turn your face this way and let me—Why, you haven’t drawn any money!”

“Well, the banker said——”

“Never mind what the banker said. You must have had a reason of your own. Not a reason, exactly, but something which——”

“Well, then, the simple fact was that I hadn’t my letter of credit.”

“Hadn’t your letter of credit?”

“Hadn’t my letter of credit.”

“Don’t repeat me like that. Where was it?”

“At the postoffice.”

“What was it doing there?”

“Well, I forgot it and left it there.”

“Upon my word, I’ve seen a good many couriers, but of all the couriers that ever I——”

“I’ve done the best I could.”

“Well, so you have, poor thing, and I’m wrong to abuse you so when you’ve been working yourself to death while we’ve been sitting here only thinking of our vexations instead of feeling grateful for what you were trying to do for us. It will all come out right. We can take the 7:30 train in the morning just as well. You’ve bought the tickets?”

“I have—and it’s a bargain, too. Second class.”

“I’m glad of it. Everybody else travels second class, and we might just as well save that ruinous extra charge. What did you pay?”

“Twenty-two dollars apiece—through to Bayreuth.”

“Why, I didn’t know you could buy through tickets anywhere but in London and Paris.”

“Some people can’t, maybe; but some people can—of whom I am one of which, it appears.”

“It seems a rather high price.”

“On the contrary. The dealer knocked off his commission.”

“Dealer?”

“Yes; I bought them at a cigar shop.”

“That reminds me. We shall have to get up pretty early, and so there should be no packing to do. Your umbrella, your rubbers, your cigars—what is the matter?”

“Hang it! I’ve left the cigars at the bank.”

“Just think of it! Well, your umbrella?”

“I’ll have that all right. There’s no hurry.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, that’s all right; I’ll take care of——”

“Where is that umbrella?”

“It’s just the merest step—it won’t take me——”

“Where is it?”

“Well, I think I left it at the cigar shop; but anyway——”

“Take your feet out from under that thing. It’s just as I expected! Where are your rubbers?”

“They—well——”

“Where are your rubbers?”

“It’s got so dry now—well, everybody says there’s not going to be another drop of——”

“Where—are—your—rubbers?”

“Well, you see—well, it was this way. First, the officer said——”

“What officer?”

“Police officer; but the Mayor, he——”

“What Mayor?”

“Mayor of Geneva; but I said——”

“Wait. What is the matter with you?”

“Who, me? Nothing. They both tried to persuade me to stay, and——”

“Stay where?”

“Well—the fact is——”

“Where have you been? What’s kept you out till half-past 10 at night?”

“O, you see, after I lost my letter of credit, I——”

“You are beating around the bush a good deal. Now answer the question in just one straightforward word. Where are those rubbers?”

“They—well; they’re in the county jail.”

I started a placating smile, but it petrified. The climate was unsuitable. Spending three or four hours in jail did not seem to the expedition humorous. Neither did it to me, at bottom.

I had to explain the whole thing, and of course it came out then that we couldn’t take the early train, because that would leave my letter of credit in hock still. It did look as if we had all got to go to bed estranged and unhappy, but by good luck that was prevented. There happened to be mention of the trunks, and I was able to say that I had attended to that feature.

“There you are just as good and thoughtful and painstaking and intelligent as you can be, and it’s a shame to find so much fault with you, and there sha’n’t be another word of it. You’ve done beautifully, admirably, and I’m sorry I ever said one ungrateful word to you.”

This hit deeper than some of the other things, and made me uncomfortable, because I wasn’t feeling as solid about that trunk errand as I wanted to. There seemed somehow to be a defect about it somewhere, though I couldn’t put my finger on it, and didn’t like to stir the matter just now, it being late and maybe well enough to let well enough alone.

Of course there was music in the morning, when it was found that we couldn’t leave by the early train. But I had no time to wait; I got only the opening bars of the overture, and then started out to get my letter of credit.

It seemed a good time to look into the trunk business and rectify it if it needed it, and I had a suspicion that it did. I was too late. The concierge said he had shipped the trunks to Zurich the evening before. I asked him how he could do that without exhibiting passage tickets.

“Not necessary in Switzerland. You pay for your trunks and send them where you please. Nothing goes free but your hand baggage.”

“How much did you pay on them?”

“A hundred and forty francs.”

“Twenty-eight dollars. There’s something wrong about that trunk business, sure.”

Next I met the porter. He said:

“You have not slept well, is it not? You have the worn look. If you would like a courier, a good one has arrived last night, and is not engaged for five days already, by the name of Ludi. We recommend him; dass heiss, the Grande Hotel Beau Rivage recommends him.”

I declined with coldness. My spirit was not broken yet. And I did not like having my condition taken notice of in this way. I was at the county jail by 9 o’clock, hoping that the mayor might chance to come before his regular hour, but he didn’t. It was dull there. Every time I offered to touch anything, or look at anything, or do anything, or refrain from doing anything, the policeman said it was “defendu.” I thought I would practice my French on him, but he wouldn’t have that, either. It seemed to make him particularly bitter to hear his own tongue.

The Mayor came at last, and then there was no trouble; for the minute he had convened the Supreme Court—which they always do whenever there is valuable property in dispute—and got everything shipshape and sentries posted, and had prayer by the chaplain, my unsealed letter was brought and opened, and there wasn’t anything in it but some photographs; because, as I remembered now, I had taken out the letter of credit so as to make room for the photographs and had put the letter in my other pocket, which I proved to everybody’s satisfaction by fetching it out and showing it with a good deal of exultation. So then the Court looked at each other in a vacant kind of way, and then at me, and then at each other again, and finally let me go, but said it was imprudent for me to be at large, and asked me what my profession was. I said I was a courier. They lifted up their eyes in a kind of reverent way and said “Du lieber Gott!” and I said a word of courteous thanks for their apparent admiration and hurried off to the bank.

However, being a courier was already making me a great stickler for order and system and one thing at a time and each thing in its own proper turn; so I passed by the bank and branched off and started for the two lacking members of the

Expedition. A cab lazied by, and I took it upon persuasion. I gained no speed by this, but it was a reposeful turnout, and I liked reposefulness. The week-long jubilations over the six hundredth anniversary of the birth of Swiss liberty and the Signing of the Compact was at flood tide, and all the streets were clothed in fluttering flags.

The horse and the driver had been drunk three days and nights, and had known no stall nor bed meantime. They looked as I felt—dreamy and seedy. But we arrived in the course of time. I went in and rang, and asked the housemaid to rush out the lacking members. She said something which I did not understand, and I returned to the chariot. The girl had probably told me that those people did not belong on her floor, and that it would be judicious for me to go higher and ring from floor to floor till I found them; for in those Swiss flats there does not seem to be any way to find the right family but to be patient and guess your way along up. I calculated that I must wait fifteen minutes, there being three details inseparable from an occasion of this sort: 1, put on hats, come down and climb in; 2, return of one to get “my other glove”; 3, presently, return of the other one to fetch “my French Verbs at a Glance.” I would muse during the fifteen minutes and take it easy.

A very still and blank interval ensued, and then I felt a hand on my shoulder and started. The intruder was a policeman. I glanced up and perceived that there was new scenery. There was a good deal of a crowd, and they had that pleased and interested look which such a crowd wears when they see that somebody is out of luck. The horse was asleep, and so was the driver, and some boys had hung them and me full of gaudy decorations stolen from the innumerable banner poles. It was a scandalous spectacle. The officer said:

“I’m sorry, but we can’t have you sleeping here all day.”

I was wounded and said with dignity:

“I beg your pardon. I was not sleeping, I was thinking.”

“Well, you can think if you want to, but you’ve got to think to yourself; you disturb the whole neighborhood.”

It was a poor joke, but it made the crowd laugh. I snore at night, sometimes, but it is not likely that I would do such a thing in the daytime and in such a place. The officer undeco-

rated us and seemed sorry for our friendlessness, and really tried to be humane; but he said we mustn't stop there any longer or he would have to charge us rent. It was the law, he said, and he went on to say in a sociable way that I was looking pretty moldy and he wished he knew——

I shut him off pretty austerely, and said I hoped one might celebrate a little these days, especially when one was personally concerned.

“Personally?” he asked. “How?”

“Because 600 years ago an ancestor of mine signed the compact.”

He reflected a moment, then looked me over and said:

“Ancestor! It's my opinion you signed it yourself. For of all the old ancient relics that ever I—but never mind about that. What is it you are waiting here for so long?”

I said:

“I'm not waiting here so long at all. I'm waiting fifteen minutes till they forget a glove and a book and go back and get them.” Then I told him who they were that I had come for.

He was very obliging, and began to shout inquiries to the tiers of heads and shoulders projecting from the windows above us. Then a woman away up there sung out:

“Oh, they? Why I got them a cab and they left here long ago—half-past eight, I should say.”

It was annoying. I glanced at my watch, but didn't say anything. The officer said:

“It is a quarter of 12, you see. You should have inquired better. You have been asleep three-quarters of an hour, and in such a sun as this. You are baked—baked black. It is wonderful. And you will miss your train, perhaps. You interest me greatly. What is your occupation?”

I said I was a courier. It seemed to stun him, and before he could come to we were gone.

When I arrived in the third story of the hotel I found our quarters vacant. I was not surprised. The moment a courier takes his eye off his tribe they go shopping. The nearer it is to train time the surer they are to go. I sat down to try and think out what I had best do next, but presently the hall boy found me there and said the expedition had gone to the station half an hour before. It was the first time I had known them to do a

rational thing, and it was very confusing. This is one of the things that make a courier's life so difficult and uncertain. Just as matters are going the smoothest, his people will strike a lucid interval, and down go all his arrangements to wreck and ruin.

The train was to leave at 12 noon sharp. It was now ten minutes after 12. I could be at the station in ten minutes. I saw I had no great amount of leeway, for this was the lightning express, and on the continent the lightning expresses are pretty fastidious about getting away some time during the advertised day. My people were the only ones remaining in the waiting-room; everybody else had passed through and "mounted the train," as they say in those regions. They were exhausted with nervousness and fret, but I comforted them and heartened them up, and we made our rush.

But no; we were out of luck again. The doorkeeper was not satisfied with the tickets. He examined them cautiously, deliberately, suspiciously; then glared at me a while, and after that he called another official. The two examined the tickets, and called another official. These called others, and the convention discussed and discussed, and gesticulated and carried on, until I begged that they would consider how time was flying and just pass a few resolutions and let us go. Then they said very courteously that there was a defect in the tickets, and asked me where I got them.

I judged I saw what the trouble was now. You see, I had bought the tickets in a cigar shop, and, of course, the tobacco smell was on them. Without doubt, the thing they were up to was to work the tickets through the Custom-house and collect duty on that smell. So I resolved to be perfectly frank; it is sometimes the best way. I said:

"Gentlemen, I will not deceive you. These railway tickets—"

"Ah, pardon, m'sieur! These are not railway tickets."

"Oh," I said. "Is that the defect?"

"Ah, truly, yes, monsieur. These are lottery tickets, yes; and it is a lottery which has been drawn two years ago."

I affected to be greatly amused; it is all one can do in such circumstances; it is all one can do, and yet there is no value in it; it deceives nobody and you can see that everybody around pities you and is ashamed of you. One of the hardest situations

in life, I think, is to be full of grief and a sense of defeat and shabbiness that way, and yet have to put on an outside of archness and gaiety, while all the time you know that your own expedition, the treasures of your heart, and whose love and reverence you are by the custom of our civilization entitled to, are being consumed with humiliation before strangers to see you earning and getting a compassion which is a stigma, a brand—a brand which certifies you to be—oh, anything and everything which is fatal to human respect.

I said cheerily, it was all right, just one of those little accidents that was likely to happen to anybody—I would have the right tickets in two minutes, and we would catch the train yet, and, moreover, have something to laugh about all through the journey. I did get the tickets in time, all stamped and complete, but then it turned out that I couldn't take them, because in taking so much pains about the two missing members I had skipped the bank and hadn't the money. So then the train left, and there didn't seem to be anything to do but go back to the hotel, which we did; but it was kind of melancholy and not much said. I tried to start a few subjects, like scenery and transubstantiation, and those sorts of things, but they didn't seem to hit the weather right.

We had lost our good rooms, but we got some others which were pretty scattering, but would answer. I judged things would brighten now, but the Head of the Expedition said send up the trunks. It made me feel pretty cold. There was a doubtful something about that trunk business, I was almost sure of it. I was going to suggest——

But a wave of the hand sufficiently restrained me, and I was informed that we would now camp for three days and see if we could rest up.

I said all right, never mind ringing, I would go down and attend to the trunks myself. I got a cab and went straight to Mr. Charles Natural's place and asked what order it was I had left there.

“To send seven trunks to the hotel.”

“And were you to bring any back?”

“No.”

“You are sure I didn't tell you to bring back seven that would be found piled in the lobby?”

“Absolutely sure you didn’t.”

“Then the whole fourteen are gone to Zurich or Jericho or somewhere, and there is going to be more debris around that hotel when the Expedition——”

I didn’t finish, because my mind was getting to be in a good deal of a whirl, and when you are that way you think you have finished a sentence when you haven’t, and you go mooning and dreaming away, and the first thing you know you get run over by a dray or a cow or something.

I left the cab there—I forgot it—and on my way back I thought it all out and concluded to resign, because otherwise I should be nearly sure to be discharged. But I didn’t believe it would be a good idea to resign in person; I could do it by message. So I sent for Mr. Ludi and explained that there was a courier going to resign on account of incompatibility or fatigue or something, and as he had four or five vacant days, I would like to insert him into that vacancy if he thought he could fill it. When everything was arranged I got him to go up and say to the Expedition that, owing to an error made by Mr. Natural’s people, we were out of trunks here, but would have plenty in Zurich, and we’d better take the first train, freight, gravel or construction, and move right along.

He attended to that and came down with an invitation for me to go up—yes, certainly; and, while we walked along over to the bank to get money and collect my cigars and tobacco, and to the cigar shop to trade back the lottery tickets and get my umbrella and to Mr. Natural to pay that cab and send it away, and to the county jail to get my rubbers and leave p. p. c. cards for the Mayor and Supreme Court, he described the weather to me that was prevailing on the upper levels there with the Expedition, and I saw that I was doing very well where I was.

I stayed out in the woods till 4 P.M., to let the weather moderate and then turned up at the station just in time to take the 3 o’clock express for Zurich along with the Expedition, now in the hands of Ludi, who conducted its complex affairs with little apparent effort or inconvenience.

Well, I had worked like a slave while I was in office, and done the very best I knew how; yet all that these people dwelt upon or seemed to care to remember was the defects of my

administration, not its creditable features. They would skip over a thousand creditable features to remark upon and reiterate and fuss about just one fact, till it seemed to me they would wear it out; and not much of a fact, either, taken by itself—the fact that I elected myself courier in Geneva, and put in work enough to carry a circus to Jerusalem and yet never even got my gang out of the town. I finally said I didn't wish to hear any more about the subject, it made me tired. And I told them to their faces that I would never be a courier again to save anybody's life. And, if I live long enough I'll prove it. I think it's a difficult, brain racking, overworked and thoroughly ungrateful office, and the main bulk of its wages is a sore heart and a bruised spirit.

January 3, 1892