CLASSICS SERIES

MARK TWAIN

ROUGHING IT

Introduction by Zoë Girling

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MARK TWAIN

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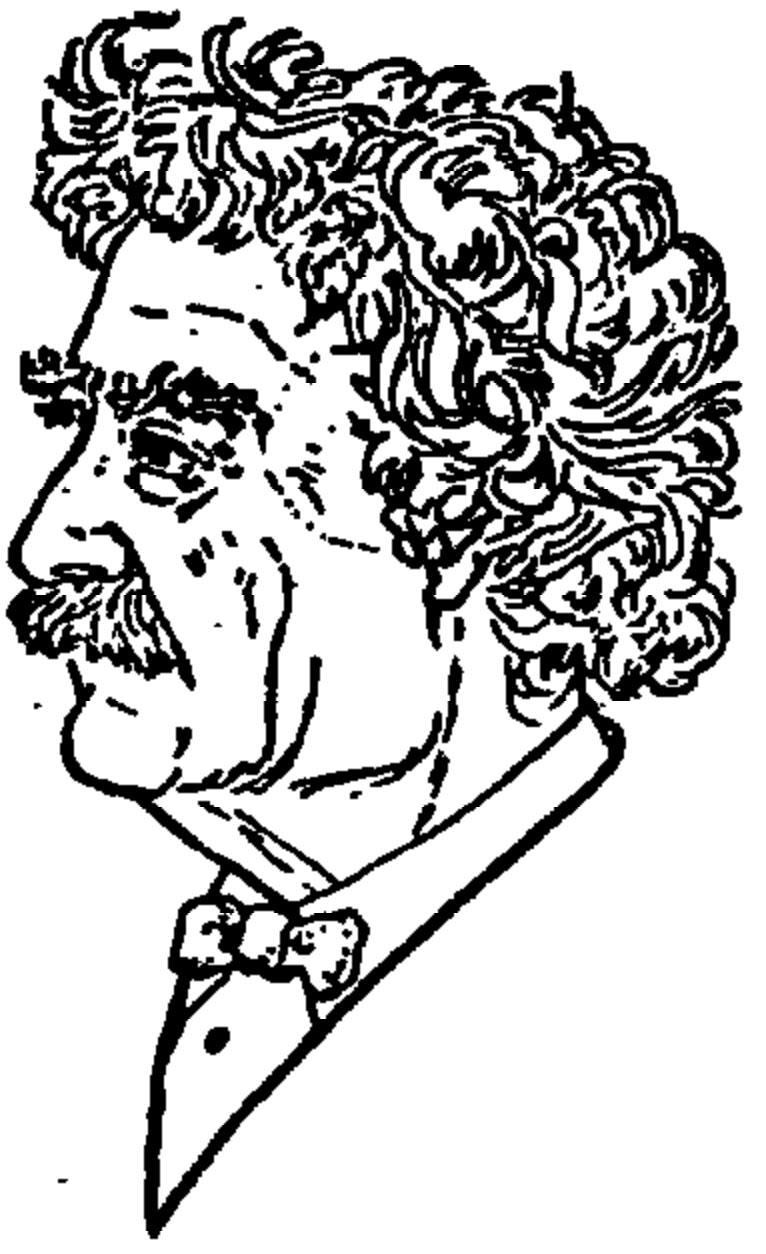
TO

Calvin H. Higbie,
of California,
An Honest Man, a Genial Comrade,
and a Steadfast Friend,

THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED
BY THE AUTHOR

In Memory of the Curious Time
When We Two
Were Millionaires for Ten Days

ROUGHING IT



MARK TWAIN

Introduction

Samuel L. Clemens arrived in Nevada Territory in 1861, in the "flush times" of the silver diggings, which were then scarcely two years old. He was twenty-five, and in search of his future. When he left the Far West at the end of 1866, he had become Mark Twain, with a national reputation as a humorist earned chiefly through journalism, but also through public lectures; and he was pretty well committed to a life as a writer and entertainer.

Roughing It, published in 1872, is Mark Twain's account of the Far West. Though it depends upon his own observations and experiences in the West, and its form is loosely autobiographical, it is a work of the imagination. It defies any exact classification by content: it records journeys and people and places, as well as episodes, anecdotes and tall tales; it gives a graphic and detailed picture of the life of the silver and gold fields and the mining towns. All these are related to each other and given their force and reality only by one thing: the voice of the narrator. The book makes no apology for its lack of any visible pattern; rather the seemingly empirical, even chaotic, as-the-thought-strikes-me order of contents is part of the book's power to charm, creating a movement which is at one with the single extended fictional creation of the book, the character "Mark

Twain." He sets out as a very young man (notably younger, and more inexperienced, than his creator), with more than a little of the vagabond in him, to reach the fabled West and try his luck.

But luck can only be permitted a limited interference with destiny. As far as "story" goes, what happens to the young narrator is controlled by his function in the book, which amounts to saying, by his own nature. He catches the "silver fever" and goes prospecting; he joins the "beggars' revel" of a thousand prospective millionaires—whose "credit was not good at the grocer's." There is really only one moment of "plot interest," about midway through the book, when he and his partner Higbie nearly make their fortune. They find a "blind lead" to a vein of silver, but incredibly, fail to follow up their claim. The reader is as rueful as the narrator. Yet we cannot imagine that he might have become one of the "silver nabobs" he describes, for then he would have lost his detached, radically innocent condition that enabled him to be entirely immersed in the frenzied life of the miners and yet to portray it so vividly for our benefit.

By now the narrator is of course no longer the ingenuous youth who gloried in the adventure of the stagecoach ride, and was wide-eyed at the thought of meeting a famous desperado; he has at least to take on the protective color of the frontiersman to survive. Yet he must also be free at all times to depart. A bit of the paragraph describing his last mining efforts, which convinced him that he had better accept the alternative job that was offering at the time, namely a journalist's, illustrates his tone:

> "We . . . went to work on a little rubbishy claim of ours that had a shaft on it eight feet deep . . . . You must brace the shovel forward with the side of your knee till it is full, and then, with a skillful toss, throw it backward over your left shoulder. I made the toss, and landed the mess just on the edge of the shaft and it all came back on my head and down the back of my neck. I never said a word, but climbed out and walked home. I inwardly resolved that I would starve before I would make a target of myself and shoot rubbish at it with a long-handled shovel. . . ." (Chapter 42)

The joke throughout *Roughing It* is most often on himself, and this makes it very easy for the reader to share his point of view and his experiences. Twain learns to share the experiences and the humor of the Westerners. He conveys without rancor, indeed with almost a loving tolerance, a view of what in them is gullible and foolish; and with a more satiric edge, what is greedy, corrupt, and cruel. Many grim and ferocious jokes in *Roughing It* come out of the violence and squalor of frontier lives. "Laughs with everything" seems to be the frontier's daily fare; and Twain, swapping yarns in the camps and saloons, or undertaking to write for newspapers in Virginia City and in San Francisco, is superbly qualified to supply it. In the tradition of the "funnymen," the tellers of tall tales, he creates with infinite patience such elaborate concoctions as Jim Blaine's story of His Grandfather's Old Ram, or The Great Landslide Case, perfecting the art of straight-faced narration of the totally absurd or fantastic.

Rhythms of talk dominate the whole narrative. Twain delights in varieties of speech. In one celebrated dialogue, between Scotty Briggs, a "stalwart Californian rough," and a minister who is a "fragile, gentle, spirituel new fledgling from an Eastern theological seminary," he symbolizes, through their mutually unintelligible dialects, the gulf of incomprehension which divides the new and the old parts of America. Idiosyncrasies of language are poetically put to use to reveal the heroism, the comedy, and often also the pathos of situations artlessly exposed in reported speech.

Characteristically, Twain laughs at himself even as a humorist: " 'Is your laugh hung on a hair trigger?—that is, is it critical, or can you get it off *easy?*' " he asks late in the book (himself sounding thoroughly Western) of a man he thinks of hiring to "plant" in the audience for his first public lecture; whereupon the employee "laughed a specimen or two that struck [him] as being about the article [he] wanted," and is duly taken on (Chapter 78). Though *Roughing It* is by no means even in quality throughout, there are always these surprise turns to disarm the inconveniently "critical" reader, and charm him back to the companionship of this gay, self-deprecatory, common-sensible and infinitely good-humored narrator.

Twain enjoyed the writing of *Roughing It*. "By all odds it is the finest piece of writing I ever did," he exclaimed in delight as he finished the description of the pony-express rider in Chapter 8. His book is more than an entertainment delivering boisterous humor with unflagging energy. Occasionally passages in it seem to stand alone, separating themselves from the surrounding matter because of their unexpected and almost inexplicable intensity. W. D. Howells, Twain's close friend and consistently perceptive appreciator, calls this element in Twain's writing "Western," implying the widest sense of exploration and discovery. He says:

> ". . . there is something curiously, not very definably, elemental, which seems to me Western. He behaves himself as if he were the first man who was ever up against the proposition in hand . . . here is a new world, and he explores it with a ramping joy, and shouts for the reader to come on. . . ."

Howells called Mark Twain "the Lincoln of our literature," implying not only his literary pre-eminence but also his greatness, shared with Lincoln, in demonstrating a peculiarly American, new-world style of memorable utterance. Lincoln also loved tall tales, also possessed "the common touch," and, as a master of the words of common speech, expressed universal truths in a style that habitually turned phrases whittled off a stick into inscriptions on marble.

Of the major books of Mark Twain, only *The Innocents Abroad* preceded *Roughing It*. His greatest achievements were still before him in the following twenty or more years of vigorous writing, which were to produce such enduring masterpieces as *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). In *Roughing It*, he found a formula for successful authorship; he was tapping a resource richer than the vein of silver he missed in Nevada, an original vocabulary for expressing the elemental experience of western expansion. As Mark Twain emerged from the West, he was about to offer to the whole world the opportunity of discovering America anew between the covers of his books.

ZOË GIRLING, M. Litt., Cantab.

Suggested Reading List:

Twain's Contemporaries:

Meine, Franklin II, ed., *Tall Tales of the Southwest*, New York, 1930.

King, Clarence, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, reprinted New York, 1935.

Wright, William ("Dan De Quille," Twain's colleague and friend on the Virginia City *Enterprise*), *The Big Bonanza*, New York, 1947.

Howells, William D., *My Mark Twain*, New York, 1910.

Critics' discussions of Roughing It: (a very short list!)

Brooks, Van Wyck, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, revised ed. New York, 1933.

De Voto, Bernard, *Mark Twain's America*, Cambridge, Mass., 1932.

Lynn, Kenneth S., *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humour*, Boston, 1959.

Chapter 1 MY BROTHER APPOINTED SECRETARY OF NEVADA—I ENVY HIS PROSPECTIVE ADVENTURES—AM APPOINTED PRIVATE SECRETARY UNDER HIM—MY CONTENTMENT COMPLETE—PACKED IN ONE HOUR—DREAMS AND VISIONS—ON THE MISSOURI RIVER—A BULLY BOAT

My brother had just been appointed Secretary of Nevada Territory—an office of such majesty that it concentrated in itself the duties and dignities of treasurer, comptroller, secretary of state, and acting governor in the governor's absence. A salary of eighteen hundred dollars a year and the title of "Mr. Secretary" gave to the great position an air of wild and imposing grandeur. I was young and ignorant, and I envied my brother. I coveted his distinction and his financial splendor, but particularly and especially the long, strange journey he was going to make, and the curious new world he was going to explore. He was going to travel! I never had been away from home, and that word "travel" had a seductive charm for me. Pretty soon he would be hundreds and hundreds of miles away on the great plains and deserts, and among the mountains of the Far West, and would see buffaloes and Indians, and prairie dogs, and antelopes, and have all kinds of adventures, and maybe get hanged or scalped, and have ever such a fine time, and write home and tell us all about it, and be a hero. And he would see the gold mines and the silver mines, and maybe go about of an afternoon when his work was done, and pick up two or three pailfuls of shining slugs, and nuggets of gold and silver on the hillside. And by and by he would become very rich, and return home by sea, and be able to talk as calmly about San Francisco and the ocean and "the isthmus" as if it was nothing of any consequence to have seen those marvels face to face. What I suffered in contemplating his happiness, pen cannot describe. And so, when he offered me, in cold blood, the sublime position of private secretary under him, it appeared to me that the heavens and the earth passed away, and the firmament was rolled together as a scroll! I had nothing more to desire. My contentment was complete. At the end of an hour or two I was ready for the journey. Not much packing up was necessary, because we were going in the overland stage from the Missouri frontier to Nevada, and passengers were only allowed a small quantity of baggage apiece. There was no Pacific railroad in those fine times of ten or twelve years ago—not a single rail of it.

I only proposed to stay in Nevada three months—I had no thought of staying longer than that. I meant to see all I could that was new and strange, and then hurry home to business. I little thought that I would not see the end of that three-month pleasure excursion for six or seven uncommonly long years!

I dreamed all night about Indians, deserts, and silver bars, and in due time, next day, we took shipping at the St. Louis wharf on board a steamboat bound up the Missouri River.

We were six days going from St. Louis to "St. Joe"—a trip that was so dull, and sleepy, and eventless that it has left no more impression on my memory than if its duration had been six minutes instead of that many days. No record is left in my mind, now, concerning it, but a confused jumble of savage-looking snags, which we deliberately walked over with one wheel or the other; and of reefs which we butted and butted, and then retired from and climbed over in some softer place; and of sand bars which we roosted on occasionally, and rested, and then got out our crutches and sparred over. In fact, the boat might almost as well have gone to St. Joe by land, for she was walking most of the time, anyhow—climbing over reefs and clambering over snags patiently and laboriously all day long. The captain said she was a "bully" boat, and all she wanted was more "shear" and a bigger wheel. I thought she wanted a pair of stilts, but I had the deep sagacity not to say so.

Chapter 2 ARRIVE AT ST. JOSEPH—ONLY TWENTY-FIVE POUNDS BAGGAGE ALLOWED—FAREWELL TO KID GLOVES AND DRESS COATS—ARMED TO THE TEETH—THE "ALLEN"—A CHEERFUL WEAPON—PERSUADED TO BUY A MULE—SCHEDULE OF LUXURIES—WE LEAVE THE "STATES"—"OUR COACH"—MAILS FOR THE INDIANS—BETWEEN A WINK AND AN EARTHQUAKE—A MODERN SPHINX AND HOW SHE ENTERTAINED US—A SOCIABLE HEIFER

The first thing we did on that glad evening that landed us at St. Joseph was to hunt up the stage office, and pay a hundred and fifty dollars apiece for tickets per overland coach to Carson City, Nevada.

The next morning, bright and early, we took a hasty breakfast and hurried to the starting place. Then an inconvenience presented itself which we had not properly appreciated before, namely, that one cannot make a heavy traveling trunk stand for twenty-five pounds of baggage—because it weighs a good deal more. But that was all we could take—twenty-five pounds each. So we had to snatch our trunks open and make a selection in a good deal of a hurry. We put our lawful twenty-five pounds apiece all in one valise, and shipped the trunks back to St. Louis again. It was a sad parting, for now we had no swallow-tail coats and white kid gloves to wear at Pawnee receptions in the Rocky Mountains, and no stovepipe hats nor patent-leather boots, nor anything else necessary to make life calm and peaceful. We were reduced to a war footing. Each of us put

on a rough, heavy suit of clothing, woolen army shirt and "stogy" boots included; and into the valise we crowded a few white shirts, some underclothing, and such things. My brother, the Secretary, took along about four pounds of United States statutes and six pounds of unabridged dictionary; for we did not know—poor innocents—that such things could be bought in San Francisco on one day and received in Carson City the next. I was armed to the teeth with a pitiful little Smith & Wesson's seven-shooter, which carried a ball like a homeopathic pill, and it took the whole seven to make a dose for an adult. But I thought it was grand. It appeared to me to be a dangerous weapon. It only had one fault—you could not hit anything with it. One of our "conductors" practiced awhile on a cow with it, and as long as she stood still and behaved herself she was safe; but as soon as she went to moving about, and he got to shooting at other things, she came to grief. The secretary had a small-sized Colt's revolver strapped around him for protection against the Indians, and to guard against accidents he carried it uncapped. Mr. George Bemis was dismally formidable. George Bemis was our fellow traveler. We had never seen him before. He wore in his belt an old original "Allen" revolver, such as irreverent people called a "pepperbox." Simply drawing the trigger back, cocked and fired the pistol. As the trigger came back, the hammer would begin to rise and the barrel to turn over, and presently down would drop the hammer, and away would speed the ball. To aim along the turning barrel and hit the thing aimed at was a feat which was probably never done with an "Allen" in the world. But George's was a reliable weapon, nevertheless, because, as one of the stage drivers afterward said, "If she didn't get what she went after, she would fetch something else." And so she did. She went after a deuce of spades nailed against a tree, once, and fetched a mule standing about thirty yards to the left of it. Bemis did not want the mule; but the owner came out with a double-barreled shotgun and persuaded him to buy it anyhow. It was a cheerful weapon—the "Allen." Sometimes all its six barrels would go off at once, and then there was no safe place in all the region roundabout but behind it.

We took two or three blankets for protection against frosty weather in the mountains. In the matter of luxuries we were modest—we took none along but some pipes and five pounds of smoking tobacco. We had two large canteens to carry water in, between stations on the plains, and we also took with us a little shot bag of silver coin for daily expenses in the way of breakfasts and dinners.

By eight o'clock everything was ready, and we were on the other side of the river. We jumped into the stage, the driver cracked his whip, and we bowled away and left "the States" behind us. It was a superb summer morning, and all the landscape was brilliant with sunshine. There was a freshness and

breeziness, too, and an exhilarating sense of emancipation from all sorts of cares and responsibilities, that almost made us feel that the years we had spent in the close, hot city, toiling and slaving, had been wasted and thrown away. We were spinning along through Kansas, and in the course of an hour and a half we were fairly abroad on the great plains. Just here the land was rolling—a grand sweep of regular elevations and depressions as far as the eye could reach—like the stately heave and swell of the ocean's bosom after a storm. And everywhere were cornfields, accenting with squares of deeper green this limitless expanse of grassy land. But presently this sea upon dry ground was to lose its "rolling" character and stretch away for seven hundred miles as level as a floor!

Our coach was a great swinging and swaying stage, of the most sumptuous description—an imposing cradle on wheels. It was drawn by six handsome horses, and by the side of the driver sat the "conductor," the legitimate captain of the craft; for it was his business to take charge and care of the mails, baggage, express matter, and passengers. We three were the only passengers this trip. We sat on the back seat, inside. About all the rest of the coach was full of mailbags—for we had three days' delayed mails with us. Almost touching our knees, a perpendicular wall of mail matter rose up to the roof. There was a great pile of it strapped on top of the stage, and both the fore and hind boots were full. We had twenty-seven hundred pounds of it aboard, the driver said—"a little for Brigham, and Carson, and 'Frisco, but the heft of it for the Injuns, which is powerful troublesome 'thout they get plenty of truck to read." But as he just then got up a fearful convulsion of his countenance which was suggestive of a wink being swallowed by an earthquake, we guessed that his remark was intended to be facetious, and to mean that we would unload the most of our mail matter somewhere on the plains and leave it to the Indians, or whosoever wanted it.

We changed horses every ten miles, all day long, and fairly flew over the hard, level road. We jumped out and stretched our legs every time the coach stopped, and so the night found us still vivacious and unfatigued.

After supper a woman got in who lived about fifty miles further on, and we three had to take turns at sitting outside with the driver and conductor. Apparently she was not a talkative woman. She would sit there in the gathering twilight and fasten her steadfast eyes on a mosquito rooting into her arm, and slowly she would raise her other hand till she had got his range, and then she would launch a slap at him that would have jolted a cow; and after that she would sit and contemplate the corpse with tranquil satisfaction—for she never missed her mosquito; she was a dead shot at short range. She never removed a carcass, but left them there for bait. I sat by this grim Sphinx and watched her kill thirty or forty mosquitoes

—watched her, and waited for her to say something, but she never did. So I finally opened the conversation myself. I said:

"The mosquitoes are pretty bad about here, madam."

"You bet!"

"What did I understand you to say, madam?"

"You BET!"

Then she cheered up, and faced around and said:

"Danged if I didn't begin to think you fellers was deef and dumb. I did, b' gosh. Here I've sot, and sot, and sot, a-bust'n muskeeters and wonderin' what was ailin' ye. Fust I thot you was deef and dumb, then I thot you was sick or crazy, or suthin', and then by and by I begin to reckon you was a passel of sickly fools that couldn't think of nothing to say. Wher'd ye come from?"

The Sphinx was a Sphinx no more! The fountains of her great deep were broken up, and she rained the nine parts of speech forty days and forty nights, metaphorically speaking, and buried us under a desolating deluge of trivial gossip that left not a crag or pinnacle of rejoinder projecting above the tossing waste of dislocated grammar and decomposed pronunciation!

How we suffered, suffered, suffered! She went on, hour after hour, till I was sorry I ever opened the mosquito question and gave her a start. She never did stop again until she got to her journey's end toward daylight; and then she stirred us up as she was leaving the stage (for we were nodding, by that time), and said:

"Now you git out at Cottonwood, you fellers, and lay over a couple o' days, and I'll be along sometime tonight, and if I can do ye any good by edgin' in a word now and then, I'm right thar. Folks 'll tell you 't I've always ben kind o' offish and partic'lar for a gal that's raised in the woods, and I *am*, with the ragtag and bobtail, and a gal *has* to be, if she wants to *be* anything, but when people comes along which is my equals, I reckon I'm a pretty sociable heifer after all."

We resolved not to "lay by at Cottonwood."

Chapter 3 "THE THOROUGHBRACE IS BROKE"—MAILS DELIVERED PROPERLY—SLEEPING UNDER DIFFICULTIES—A JACKASS RABBIT MEDITATING, AND ON BUSINESS—A MODERN GULLIVER—SAGEBRUSH—OVERCOATS AS AN ARTICLE OF DIET—SAD FATE OF A CAMEL—WARNING TO EXPERIMENTERS

About an hour and a half before daylight we were bowling along smoothly over the road—so smoothly that our cradle only rocked in a gentle, lulling way, that was gradually soothing us to sleep, and dulling our consciousness—when something

gave away under us! We were dimly aware of it, but indifferent to it. The coach stopped. We heard the driver and conductor talking together outside, and rummaging for a lantern, and swearing because they could not find it—but we had no interest in whatever had happened, and it only added to our comfort to think of those people out there at work in the murky night, and we snug in our nest with the curtains drawn. But presently, by the sounds, there seemed to be an examination going on, and then the driver's voice said:

"By George, the thoroughbrace is broke!"

This startled me broad awake—as an undefined sense of calamity is always apt to do. I said to myself: "Now, a thoroughbrace is probably part of a horse; and doubtless a vital part, too, from the dismay in the driver's voice. Leg, maybe—and yet how could he break his leg waltzing along such a road as this? No, it can't be his leg. That is impossible, unless he was reaching for the driver. Now, what can be the thoroughbrace of a horse, I wonder? Well, whatever comes, I shall not air my ignorance in this crowd, anyway."

Just then the conductor's face appeared at a lifted curtain, and his lantern glared in on us and our wall of mail matter. He said:

"Gents, you'll have to turn out a spell. Thoroughbrace is broke."

We climbed out into a chill drizzle, and felt ever so homeless and dreary. When I found that the thing they called a "thoroughbrace" was the massive combination of belts and springs which the coach rocks itself in, I said to the driver:

"I never saw a thoroughbrace used up like that before, that I can remember. How did it happen?"

"Why, it happened by trying to make one coach carry three days' mail—that's how it happened," said he. "And right here is the very direction which is wrote on all the newspaper bags which was to be put out for the Injuns for to keep 'em quiet. It's most uncommon lucky, becuz it's so nation dark I should 'a' gone by unbeknowns if that air thoroughbrace hadn't broke."

I knew that he was in labor with another of those winks of his, though I could not see his face, because he was bent down at work; and wishing him a safe delivery, I turned to and helped the rest get out the mail sacks. It made a great pyramid by the roadside when it was all out. When they had mended the thoroughbrace we filled the two boots again, but put no mail on top, and only half as much inside as there was before. The conductor bent all the seat backs down, and then filled the coach just half full of mailbags from end to end. We objected loudly to this, for it left us no seats. But the conductor was wiser than we, and said a bed was better than seats, and moreover, this plan would protect his thoroughbraces. We never wanted any seats after that. The lazy bed was infinitely preferable. I had many an exciting day, subsequently, lying on