

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Thirteen.]

Ascent of Mount Vesuvius---A Weary Climb--- The Summit---Cooking by Volcanic Fires ---Vesuvius and Kilauea---The Romance of the Venetian Gondola---Venice by Moon- light---A Fete Upon the Water---The De- scent of Mount Vesuvius.

NAPLES, August, 1867.

Ascent of Mount Vesuvius---Continued.

At the Hermitage we were about fifteen or eighteen hundred feet above the sea, and thus far a portion of the ascent had been pretty abrupt. For the next two miles the road was a mixture--sometimes the ascent was abrupt and sometimes it was not; but one characteristic it possessed all the time, without failure--without modification--it was all uncompromisingly and unspeakably infernal. It was a rough, narrow trail, and led over an old lava flow--a black ocean which was tumbled into a thousand fantastic shapes--a wild chaos of ruin, desolation and barrenness--a wilderness of billowy upheavals, of furious whirlpools, of miniature mountains rent assunder--of gnarled and knotted, wrinkled and twisted masses of blackness that mimicked branching roots, great vines, trunks of trees, all interlaced and mingled together;--and all these wierd shapes, all this turbulent panorama, all this stormy, far-stretching waste of blackness, with its thrilling suggestiveness of life, of action, of boiling, surging, furious motion, was petrified!--all stricken dead and cold in the instant of its maddest rioting!--fettered, paralysed, and left to glower at heaven in impotent rage forevermore!

Finally we stood in a level, narrow valley (a valley that had been created by the terrific march of some old-time irruption) and on either hand towered the two steep peaks of Vesuvius. The one we had to climb--the one that contains the active volcano--seemed about 800 or 1,000 feet high, and looked almost too straight-up-and-down for any man to climb, and certainly no mule could climb it with a man on his back. Four of these native pirates will lug you to the top in a sedan chair, if you wish it, but suppose they were to slip and let you fall,--is it likely that you would ever stop rolling? Not this side of eternity, perhaps. We left the mules, sharpened our finger-nails, and began the ascent I have been writing about so long, at 20 minutes to 6 in the morning. The path led straight up a rugged sweep of loose chunks of pumice stone, and for about every two steps forward we took, we slid back one. It was so excessively steep that we had to stop, every fifty or sixty steps, and rest a moment. To see our comrades, we had to look very nearly straight up at those above us, and very nearly straight down at those below. The ladies wore no hoops, which was well. They would have looked like so many umbrellas. We stood on the summit at last--it had taken an hour and fifteen minutes to make the trip.

What we saw there was simply a circular crater--a circular ditch, if you please--about two hundred feet deep, four or five hundred feet wide, and half a mile in circumference. In the centre was a torn and ragged upheaval a hundred feet high, all snowed over with a sulphur crust of many and many a brilliant and beautiful color, and the ditch enclosed it as a little river does a little island, if you like the simile better. The sulphur coating of that island was gaudy in the extreme--all mingled together in the richest confusion were red, blue, brown, black, yellow, white--I do not know that there was a color, or shade of a color, or combination of colors unrepresented--and when the sun burst through the morning mists and fired this tinted magnificence, it topped imperial Vesuvius like a jewelled crown!

The crater itself--the ditch--was not so variegated in coloring, but yet, in its softness, richness, and unpretentious elegance it was more charming, more fascinating to the eye. There was nothing "loud" about its well-bred and well-dressed look. Talk of beauty!--why one could stand and look down upon it for a week without getting tired of it. It had the semblance of a pleasant meadow, whose slender grasses and whose velvety mosses were frosted with a shining dust, and tinted with palest green that deepened gradually to the darkest hue of the orange leaf, and deepened yet again into gravest brown, then faded into orange, then into brightest gold; and culminated in the delicate pink of a new-blown rose. Where portions of the meadow had sunk, and where other portions had been broken up like an ice-floe, the cavernous openings of the one, and the ragged upturned edges exposed by the other, were hung with a lace-work of soft-tinted crystals of sulphur that changed their deformities into quaint shapes and figures that were full of grace and beauty.

The walls of the ditch were brilliant with yellow banks of sulphur and with lava and pumice stone of many colors. No fire was visible anywhere, but gusts of sulphurous steam issued silently and invisibly from a thousand little cracks and fissures in the crater, and were wafted to our noses with every breeze. But so long as we kept our snouts buried in our handkerchiefs, there was small danger of suffocation.

Some of the boys poked long slips of paper down into holes and set them on fire, and so achieved the glory of lighting their cigars by the flames of Vesuvius, and others cooked eggs over fissures in the rocks and were happy.

The view from the summit would have been superb but for the fact that the sun could only pierce the mists at long intervals. Thus the glimpses we had of the grand panorama below were only fitful and unsatisfactory.

The Descent.

The descent of the mountain was a labor of only four minutes. Instead of stalking down the rugged path we ascended we chose one which was bedded knee-deep in loose ashes, and ploughed our way with prodigious strides, that would have shamed the performances of him of the seven-league boots.

The Vesuvius of to-day is a very slow affair compared to the mighty volcano of Kilauea, in the Sandwich Islands, but I am glad I visited it, partly because it was well worth it, and chiefly because I shall never have to do it again.

It is said that during one of the grand eruptions of Vesuvius it discharged massy rocks weighing many tons a thousand feet into the air, its vast jets of smoke and steam ascended thirty miles toward the firmament, and clouds of its ashes were wafted abroad and fell upon the decks of ships seven hundred and fifty miles at sea! I will take the ashes at a moderate discount, if any one will take the thirty miles of smoke, but I do not feel able to take a commanding interest in the whole story by myself.

Descent of Vesuvius---Continued.

But what has this got to do with Venice? We reached Venice at eight in the evening, three weeks ago, and entered a hearse belonging to the Grand Hotel d'Europe. At any rate, it was more like a hearse than anything else, though to speak by the card, it was a gondola. And this was the storied gondola of Venice!--the fairy boat in which the princely cavaliers of the olden time were wont to cleave the waters of the moonlit canals and look the eloquence of love into the soft eyes of patrician beauties, while the gay gondolier in silken doublet touched his guitar and sang as only gondoliers can sing! This the famed gondola and this the gorgeous gondolier!--the one an inky, rusty old canoe with a sable hearse-body clamped onto the middle of it, and the other a mangy, barefooted gutter-snipe with his shirt-tail out! Presently, as he turned a corner and shot his hearse into a dismal ditch between two long rows of towering, frowning, untenanted buildings, the gay gondolier began to sing, true to the traditions of his race. I stood it about four minutes. Then I said:

"Now, here, Roderigo Gonzales Michael Angelo, I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger, but I'm not going to have my feelings lacerated by any such caterwauling as that. If that goes on, one of us has got to take water. It is enough that my cherished dreams of Venice have been blighted forever as to the romantic gondola and the gorgeous gondolier; this system of destruction shall go no farther; I will accept the hearse, under protest, and you may fly your flag of truce in peace, but here I register a dark and bloody oath that you shan't sing."

I began to feel that the old Venice of song and story had departed forever. But I was too hasty. In a few minutes we swept gracefully out into the Grand Canal, and under the mellow moonlight the Venice of poetry and romance stood revealed. Right from the water's edge rose lines of stately palaces of marble; gondolas were gliding swiftly hither and thither and disappearing suddenly through unsuspected gates and alleys; ponderous stone bridges threw their shadows athwart the glittering waves. There was life and motion everywhere, and yet everywhere there was a hush, a stealthy sort of stillness, that was suggestive of secret enterprises of bravoes and of lovers; and clad half in moonbeams and half in mysterious shadows, the grim old mansions of the Republic seemed to have an expression about them of having an eye out for just such enterprises as these at that same moment. Music came stealing over the waters--Venice was complete. It was a beautiful picture--very soft and dreamy and beautiful. But what was this Venice to compare with the Venice of midnight? Nothing. There was a fete--a grand fete in honor of some saint who had been instrumental in getting the cholera choked off three hundred years ago, and all Venice was abroad on the water. It was no common affair, for the Venetians did not know how soon they might need the saint's services again, now that the cholera was spreading everywhere. So in one vast space--say a third of a mile wide and two miles long--were collected two thousand gondolas, and every one of them had from two to ten, twenty and even thirty colored lanterns suspended about it, and from four to a dozen occupants. Just as far as the eye could reach, these painted lights were massed together--like a vast garden of many-colored flowers, except that these blossoms were never still; they were ceaselessly gliding in and out, and mingling together, and seducing you into bewildering attempts to follow their madly evolutions. Here and there a strong red, green, or blue glare from a rocket that was struggling to get away, splendidly illuminated all the boats around it. Every gondola that swam by us, with its crescents and pyramids and circles of colored lamps hung aloft, and lighting up the faces of the young and the sweet-scented and lovely below, was a picture; and the reflections of those lights, so long, so slender, so numberless, so many-colored and so distorted and wrinkled by the waves, was a picture likewise, and one that was wonderfully beautiful. Many and many a party of young ladies and gentlemen had their state gondolas handsomely decorated and ate supper on board, bringing their swallow-tailed, white-cravatted varlets to wait upon them, and having their tables tricked out for a bridal supper. They had brought along the costly globe lamps from their drawing-rooms, and the lace and silken curtains from the same places, I suppose. And they had also brought pianos and guitars, and they played and sang operas, while the plebeian paper-lanterned gondolas from the suburbs and the back alleys crowded around to stare and listen.

There was music everywhere--choruses, string bands, brass bands, flutes, everything. Why, I was so surrounded, walled in, with music, magnificence and loveliness, that I got inspired with the spirit of the scene, and sang one tune myself. However, when I had finished the third verse and observed that the other gondolas had sailed away, and my gutter-snipe was preparing to go overboard, I stopped.

That fete was magnificent--there is no question about that. They kept it up the whole night long, and I never enjoyed myself better than I did while it lasted; which brings me, by a natural and easy transition, back to the legitimate subject of this letter, which is--

The Descent of Vesuvius---Continued.

I will speak of this in my next. MARK TWAIN.