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THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Fifteen.]

A Distant Glimpse of Athens--Bitter Disappointment--Blockade Running--A Moonlight Expedition--Sight-Seeing under Difficulties--The Parthenon and its Glories--A Vision of Beauty--Athens by Moonlight--Marauding Yankees--The Anabasis concluded.

GRECIAN ARCHIPELAGO, }  
AT SEA, AUGUST 15th, 1867. }

Ancient Athens.

We arrived and entered the ancient harbor of the Piræus yesterday morning. We dropped anchor within half a mile of the village. Away off, across the undulating Plain of Attica, could be seen a little square-topped hill with a something on it, which our glasses soon discovered to be the ruined edifices of the ancient citadel of the Athenians, and most prominent among them loomed the famous Parthenon. So exquisitely clear and pure is this wonderful atmosphere that every column of this noble structure was discernible through the telescope, and even the smaller ruins about it assumed some semblance of shape. This at a distance of five or six miles. In the valley, near the Acropolis, (the square-topped hill before spoken of,) Athens itself could be vaguely made out with an ordinary lorgnette. Everybody was anxious to get ashore and visit these classic localities as quickly as possible. No land we have yet seen has aroused such universal interest among the passengers.

But bad news came. The commandant of the Piræus came in his boat, and said we must either depart or else get outside the harbor and remain imprisoned on our ship, under rigid quarantine, for eleven days! So we took up the anchor and moved outside, to lay a dozen hours or so, taking in supplies, and then sail for Constantinople. It was the bitterest disappointment we had yet experienced. To lie a whole day right in sight of the Acropolis, and yet be obliged to go away without visiting Athens! Disappointment was hardly a strong enough word to describe the circumstances.

All hands were on deck, all the afternoon, with books and maps and glasses, trying to cipher out which "narrow rocky ridge" was the Areopagus, which sloping hill the Pnyx, which elevation the Museum Hill, and so on. And we got things mixed. Discussion became heated and party spirit ran high. Church members were gazing with emotion upon a hill which they said was the one St. Paul preached from, and another faction claimed that that hill was Hymettus, and another that it was Pentelicon! After all the trouble, we could be certain of only one thing--the square-topped hill was the Acropolis, and the noble ruin that crowned it was the Parthenon, whose picture we knew in infancy in the school books.

We inquired of everybody who came near the ship, whether there were guards in the Piræus, whether they were strict, what the chances were of capture should any of us slip ashore, and in case any of us ventured on land and were caught, what would be probably done to us? The answers were discouraging: There was a large guard or police force; the Piræus was a small town, and any stranger seen in it would surely attract attention--capture would be certain. The Commandant said the punishment would be "heavy"; when asked "how heavy?" he said it "would be "very severe"--that was all we could get out of him.

Running the Blockade.

At eleven o'clock at night, when most of the ship's company were abed, four of us (Dr. Jackson, surgeon of the ship; Dr. Birch, Colonel Denny and myself,) stole softly ashore in a small boat, a clouded moon favoring the enterprise, and started two and two, and far apart, over a low hill, intending to go clear around the Piræus, out of the range of its police. Picking our way so stealthily over that rocky, nettle-grown eminence, made me feel a good deal as if I were on my way somewhere to steal something. My immediate comrade and I talked in an undertone about quarantine laws and their penalties, but we found nothing cheering in the subject. I was posted. Only a few days before I was talking with our Captain, and he mentioned the case of a man who swam ashore from a quarantined ship somewhere, and got imprisoned six months for it; and when he was in Genoa a few years ago, a Captain of a quarantined ship went in his boat to a departing ship, which was already outside of the harbor, and put a letter on board to be taken to his family, and the authorities imprisoned him three months for it, and then conducted him and his ship fairly to sea, and warned him never to show himself in that port again while he lived. This kind of conversation did no good, further than to give a sort of dismal interest to our quarantine-breaking expedition, and so we dropped it. We made the entire circuit of that town without seeing anybody but one man, who stared at us curiously, but said nothing, and a dozen persons asleep on the ground before their doors, whom we walked among and never woke--but we woke up dogs enough, in all conscience--we always had one or two barking at our heels, and several times we had as many as ten and twelve at once. They made such an infernal din that persons aboard our ship said they could tell how we were progressing for a long time, and where we were, by the barking of the dogs. The clouded moon still favored us. When we had made the whole circuit, and were passing among the houses on the further side of the town, the moon came out splendidly, but we no longer feared the light. As we approached a well, near a house, to get a drink, the owner merely glanced at us and went within. He left the quiet, slumbering town at our mercy. I record it here proudly, that we didn't do anything to it.

Seeing no road, we took a tall hill to the left of the distant Acropolis for a mark, and steered straight for it over all obstructions, and over a little rougher piece of country than exists anywhere else outside of the State of Nevada, perhaps. Part of the way it was covered with small, loose stones--you trod on six at a time, and they all rolled. Another part of it was dry, loose, newly-ploughed ground. Still another part of it was a long stretch of low grapevines, which were tangle-some and troublesome, and which we took to be weeds. The Attic Plain, barring the grapevines, was a barren, desolate, unpoetical waste--I wonder what it was in Greece's Age of Glory, five hundred years before Christ?

Refreshments.

In the neighborhood of 1 o'clock in the morning, when we were heated with fast walking and parched with thirst, Col. Denny exclaimed, "Why these weeds are grapevines!" and in five minutes we had a score of bunches of large, white, delicious grapes, and were reaching down for more when a dark shape rose mysteriously up out of the shadows beside us and said "Ho!" And so we left.

On the Road.

In ten minutes more we struck into a beautiful road, and unlike some others we had stumbled upon at intervals, it led in the right direction. We followed it. It was broad, and smooth and white--handsome and in perfect repair, and shaded on both sides for a mile or so with single ranks of trees, and also with luxuriant vineyards. Twice we entered and stole grapes, and the second time somebody shouted at us from some invisible place. Whereupon we left again. We speculated in grapes no more on that side of Athens.

Shortly we came upon an ancient stone aqueduct, built upon arches, and from that time forth we had ruins all about us--we were approaching our journey's end. We could not see the Acropolis now or the high hill, either, and I wanted to follow the road till we were abreast of them, but the others overruled me, and we toiled laboriously up the stony hill immediately in our front--and from its summit saw another--climbed it and saw another! It was an hour of exhausting work. Soon we came upon a row of open graves, cut in the solid rock--(for a while one of them served Socrates for a prison)--we passed around the shoulder of the hill, and the citadel, in all its ruined magnificence, burst upon us! We hurried across the ravine and up a winding road, and stood on the old Acropolis, with the prodigious walls of the citadel towering high above our heads. We did not stop to inspect their massive blocks of marble, or measure their height, or guess at their extraordinary thickness, but passed at once through a great arched passage like a railway tunnel, and went straight to the gate that leads to the ancient temples. It was locked! So, after all, it seemed that we were not to see the great Parthenon face to face. We sat down and held a council of war. Result: the gate was only a flimsy structure of wood--we would break it down. It seemed like desecration, but then we had travelled far, and our necessities were urgent. We could not hunt up guides and keepers--we must be on the ship before daylight. So we argued. This was all very fine, but when we came to break the gate, we couldn't do it. We moved around an angle of the wall and found a low bastion--eight feet high without--ten or twelve within. Denny prepared to scale it, and we got ready to follow. By dint of hard scrambling he finally straddled the top, but some loose stones crumbled away and fell with a crash into the court within. There was instantly a banging of doors and a shout, Denny dropped from the wall in a twinkling, and we retreated in disorder to the gate. Xerxes took that mighty citadel 30 years before Christ, when his five million of soldiers and camp-followers followed him to Greece, and if we four Americans could have remained unmolested five minutes longer we would have done so, too.

Among the Glories of the Past.

The garrison had turned out--four Greeks. We climbed the gate and they admitted us.

We crossed a large court, entered a great door, and stood upon a pavement of purest white marble, deeply worn by foot prints. Before us, in the flooding moonlight, rose the noblest ruins we ever looked upon--the Propylæ; a small Temple of Minerva; the Temple of Hercules, and the grand Parthenon. [We got these names from the Greek guide, who didn't seem to know more than seven men ought to know.] These edifices were all built of the whitest Pentelicon marble, but have a pinkish stain upon them now. Where any part is broken, though, the fracture looks like fine loaf sugar. Six caryatides, or marble women, clad in flowing robes, support the portico of the Temple of Hercules, but the porticoes and colonnades of the other structures are formed of massive Doric and Ionic pillars, whose flutings and capitals are still measurably perfect, notwithstanding the centuries that have gone over them and the sieges they have suffered. The Parthenon, originally, was 226 feet long, 100 wide and 70 high, and had two rows of great columns, eight in each, at either end, and single rows of seventeen each down the sides, and was one of the most graceful and beautiful edifices ever erected. How tame, how unimpressive, are the vaunted monuments of ancient Rome beside it.

Most of the Parthenon's imposing columns are still standing, but the roof is gone. [It was a perfect building two hundred and fifty years ago, when a shell dropped into the Venetian magazine stored here, and the explosion which followed wrecked and unroofed it.]

As we wandered thoughtfully down the length of this stately temple, the scene about us was strangely impressive. Here were floors of vast flags of cut marble, neatly fitted together and perfectly level; cut into this floor were two semi-circular grooves which the casters of the great doors used to traverse; here and there, in lavish profusion, were gleaming white statues of men and women, propped against blocks of marble, some of them armless, some without legs, others headless--but all looking mournful and sentient, and startlingly human! They rose up and confronted the midnight intruder on every side--they stared at him with stony eyes from unlooked-for nooks and recesses; they peered at him over fragmentary heaps far down the desolate corridors; they barred his way in the midst of the broad forum, and solemnly pointed with handless arms the way from the sacred fane; and through the roofless temple the moon looked down, and banded its floor and darkened its scattered fragments and its broken statues with the slanting shadows of its columns.

What a world of ruined sculpture was about us! Stood up in rows--stacked up in piles--scattered broadcast over the wide area of the Acropolis--were hundreds of crippled statues of all sizes and of the most exquisite workmanship; and vast frag-

ments of marble that once belonged to the entablatures, covered with bas-reliefs representing battles and sieges, ships of war with three and four tiers of oars, pageants and processions--everything you could think of. History says that the temples of the Acropolis were filled with the noblest works of Praxiteles and Phidias, and of many a great master in sculpture besides--and surely these elegant fragments attest it.

We walked out into the grass-grown, fragment-strewn court beyond the Parthenon. It startled me, every now and then, to see a stony white face stare suddenly up at me out of the grass with its dead eyes. The place seemed alive with ghosts. I half expected to see the Athenian heroes of twenty centuries ago glide out of the shadows and steal into the old temple they knew so well and regarded with such boundless pride.

A Vision.

The full moon was riding high in the cloudless heavens, now. We sauntered carelessly and unthinkingly to the edge of the lofty battlements of the citadel, and looked down--a vision! And such a vision! All the beauty in all the world combined could not rival it!--Athens by moonlight! The prophet that thought the splendors of the New Jerusalem were revealed to him, surely saw this instead! It lay in the level plain right under our feet--all spread abroad like a picture--and we looked down upon it as we might have looked from a balloon. We saw no semblance of a street, but every house, every window, every clinging vine, every projection, was as distinct and sharply marked as if the time were noonday; and yet there was no glare, no glitter, nothing harsh or repulsive--the noiseless city was flooded with the mildest light that ever streamed from the moon, and seemed like some living creature wrapped in peaceful slumber. On its further side was a little temple, whose delicate pillars and ornamented front glowed with a rich lustre that chained the eye like a spell; and nearer by, the palace of the King reared its creamy walls out of the midst of a great garden of shrubbery that was flecked all over with a random shower of amber lights--a spray of golden sparks that lost their brightness in the glory of the moon, and glinted softly upon the sea of dark foliage like the pallid stars of the milky-way. Overhead the stately columns, majestic still in their ruin--under foot the dreaming city--in the distance the silver sea--not on the broad earth is there another picture half so beautiful!

As we turned and moved again through the temple, I wished that the illustrious men who had sat in it in the remote ages could visit it again and reveal themselves to our curious eyes--Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Socrates, Phocion, Pythagoras, Euclid, Pindar, Xenophon, Herodotus the historian, Praxiteles and Phidias the sculptors, and Zenxis the painter. What a constellation of celebrated names! But more than all, I wished that old Diogenes, groping so patiently with his lantern, searching so zealously for one solitary honest man in all the world, might meander along and strike our crowd. I ought not to say it, may be, but still I reckon he would have put out his light.

Famous Localities.

We left the Parthenon to keep its watch over old Athens, as it had kept it for twenty-three hundred years, and went and stood outside the walls of the citadel. In the distance was the ancient, but still almost perfect Temple of Theseus, and close by, looking to the west, was the sema, from whence Demosthenes thundered his Philippics and fired the wavering patriotism of his countrymen. To the right was Mars Hill, where the Areopagus sat in ancient times, and where St. Paul defined his position, and below was the market place where he "disputed daily" with the gossip-loving Athenians. We climbed the stone steps St. Paul ascended, and stood in the square-cut place he stood in, and tried to recollect the Bible account of the matter--but for certain reasons I could not recall the words. But I have found them since:

"Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him when he saw the city wholly given up to idolatry.

"Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him.

"And they took him and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, may we know what this new doctrine whereof thou speakest is?"

"Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars-hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious;

"For as I passed by and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom, therefore, ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you."--Acts, ch. xvii.

Homeward Bound.

It occurred to us, after a while, that if we wanted to get home before daylight betrayed us, we had better be travelling. So we hurried away. When far on our road, we had a parting view of the Parthenon, with the moonlight streaming through its open colonnades and touching its capitals with silver. As it looked then, solemn, grand and beautiful, it will always remain in my memory.

As we marched along, we began to get over our fears, and ceased to care much about quarantine scouts or anybody else. We got bold and reckless; and once, in a sudden burst of courage, I even threw a rock at a dog. It was a pleasant reflection, though, that I didn't hit him, because his master might just possibly have been a policeman, you know. Inspired by this happy failure, my valor became utterly uncontrollable, and at intervals I absolutely whistled, though on a moderate key. But boldness breeds boldness, and shortly I plunged into a vineyard, in the full light of the moon, and captured a gallon of superb grapes, not even minding the presence of a peasant who rode by on a mule. Denny and Birch followed my example. Now I had grapes enough for a dozen, but then Jackson was all swollen up with courage, too, and he was obliged to enter a vineyard presently. The first bunch he seized brought trouble. A frowzy, bearded brigand sprang into the road with a shout, and flourished a musket in the light of the moon! We sidled toward the Piræus--not running, you understand, but only advancing with celerity. The brigand shouted again, but still we advanced. It was getting late, and we had no time to fool away on every saw that wanted to drive Greek plattudes to us. We would just as soon have talked to him as not if he hadn't been in a hurry. Presently Denny said, "Those fellows are following us!"

We turned, and, sure enough, there they were--three lubberly pirates armed with guns. We slackened our pace to let them come up, and in the meantime I got out my cargo of grapes and dropped them firmly but reluctantly into the shadows by the wayside. But I was not afraid. I only felt that it was dishonest to steal grapes. And all the more so when the owner was around--and not only around, but with his friends around also. The villains came up and searched a bundle Dr. Birch had in his hand, and scowled upon him when they found it had nothing in it but some rocks from Mars Hill, and these were not contraband. They evidently suspected him of playing some wretched swindle upon them, and seemed half inclined to scalp the party. But finally they dismissed us with a warning, coughed in excellent Greek, I suppose, and dropped tranquilly in our wake. When they had gone three hundred yards they stopped, and we went on rejoiced. But behold, another armed rascal came out of the shadows and took their place, and followed us two hundred yards. Then he delivered us over to another miscreant, who emerged from some mysterious place, and he in turn to another! For a mile and a half our rear was guarded all the while by armed men. I never travelled in so much state before in all my life.

It was a good while after that before we ventured to steal any more grapes, and when we did we stirred up another disgusting brigand, and then we ceased all further speculation in that line. I suppose that fellow that rode by on the mule posted all the sentinels, from Athens to the Piræus, about us.

Every field on that long route was watched by an armed sentinel, some of whom had fallen asleep, no doubt, but were on hand, nevertheless. This shows what sort of a country modern Attica is--a community of thieves. These men were not there to guard their possessions against strangers, but against each other; for strangers seldom visit Athens and the Piræus, and when they do they go in daylight, and can buy all the grapes they want for a trifle. The modern inhabitants are thieves and liars of high repute, if gossip speaks truly concerning them, and I freely believe it does.

Home Again.

Just as the earliest tinges of the dawn flushed the eastern horizon, we closed our thirteenth mile of weary, round-about marching, and emerged upon the sea-shore abreast the ships, with our usual escort of fifteen hundred Piroean dogs howling at our heels. I hailed a boat that was two or three hundred yards from a shore, and discovered in a moment that it was a police-boat on the lookout for any quarantine-breakers that might chance to be abroad. So we dodged--we were used to that by this time--and when the scouts reached the spot we had so lately occupied, we were absent. They cruised along the shore, but in the wrong direction, and shortly our own boat issued from the gloom and took us aboard. They had heard my signal on the ship. We rowed noiselessly away, and before the police-boat came in sight again we were safe at home once more.

Four more of our passengers were anxious to visit Athens, and started half an hour after we returned; but they had not been ashore five minutes till the police got after them and chased them so hotly that they barely escaped to their boat again, and that was all. They pursued the enterprise no further.

We set sail for Constantinople to-day, but some of us don't care a fig for that. We have seen all that there was to see in the old city that had its birth three hundred years before Christ was born, and was an old town in its foundations of Troy were laid--and saw it in its most attractive aspect. Wherefore, why should we worry?

Two others, Rev. Mr. Bullard, and Mr. Beach, of the New York Sun, ran the blockade successfully last night.

MARK TWAIN.