

# THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

## LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Sixteen.]

"Living Greece No More"—A Forbidding Picture—Historical Reminiscences—Passing through the Dardanelles—The City of the Golden Horn—Constantinopolitan Nuisances—Street Scenes.

CONSTANTINOPLE, August 20th, 1867.

### Modern Greece.

EDITORS ALTA: From Athens all through the islands of the Grecian Archipelago, we saw nothing but forbidding sea-walls and barren hills, sometimes surmounted by three or four graceful columns of some ancient temple, lonely and deserted—a fitting symbol of the desolation that has come upon all Greece in these latter ages. We saw no ploughed fields, very few villages, no trees or grass or vegetation of any kind, and hardly ever an isolated house. Greece is a bleak, unsmiling desert, without agriculture, manufactures or commerce. What supports its poverty-stricken people or its Government, is a mystery to me.

I suppose that ancient Greece and modern Greece compared, furnish the most extravagant contrast to be found in history. George I, an infant of eighteen, and a scraggy lot of foreign office-holders, sit in the places of Themistocles, Pericles, and the illustrious scholars and generals of the Golden Age of Greece. The fleets that were the wonder of the world when the Parthenon was new, are a beggarly handful of fishing-smacks now, and the manly people that performed such miracles of valor at Marathon are only a tribe of degraded slaves and liars to-day. The classic Ilyssus has

The nation numbers only a few souls, and there is poverty and misery enough among them to make them and be liberal about it. Unrevenues of the State were five per cent raised from a tax of one-tenth of the products of the land (which had to bring to the royal granary any distance not exceeding six miles) and taxes on trade and commerce. The little tyrant tried to employ ten thousand men, pay all the Grand Equerries in Waiting, the Chamberlain, Lord High Chancellor, Exchequer, and all the other petty kingdoms indulge in great monarchies; and in building a white marble palace for himself. Well, the result was five goes no times and none could be done with five dollars got into trouble.

One, with its unpromising adjuncts of an aged population of thieves, who were unemployed eight months in the year, and there wasn't anything for them to steal; its barren hills and its weed-grown deserts, went begging for a good while. It was offered to one of Victoria's boys, and afterwards to various other younger sons of royalty who had no thrones and were out of business, but they all had the charity to decline the dreary honor, and veneration enough for Greece's ancient greatness to refuse to mock her sorrowful rags and dirt with a tinsel throne in this day of her humiliation—till they came to this young Danish George (I believe he is a Dane), and he took it. He has finished the splendid palace, and in the radiant moonlight the other night, and is doing many other things for the salvation of Greece, they say.

### Footprints of History.

We sailed through the barren archipelago, and into the narrow channel they sometimes call the Dardanelles and sometimes the Hellespont. This part of the country is rich in historic reminiscences and poor as Sahara in everything else. For instance, as we approached the Dardanelles, we coasted along the Plains of Troy and past the mouth of the Scamander; saw where Troy had stood (in the distance), and where it does not stand now—a city that perished fourteen hundred years before the birth of Christ, and yet Athens was two hundred and fifty years old when its foundations were laid. We saw where Agamemnon's fleets rendezvoused, and away inland a mountain which the map said was Mount Ida. Within the Hellespont we saw where the old original first shoddy contractor mentioned in history was carried out, and the "parties of the second part" gently rebuked by Xerxes. I speak of the famous bridge of boats which Xerxes ordered to be built over the narrowest part of the Hellespont (where it is only two or three miles wide). A moderate gale destroyed the flimsy structure, and the King, thinking that to publicly rebuke the contractors might have a good effect on the next set, called them out before the army and had them beheaded. In the next ten minutes he let a new contract for the bridge. It has been observed by ancient writers that the second bridge was a very good bridge. Xerxes crossed his host of five millions of men on it, and if it had not been purposely destroyed, it would probably have been there yet. If our Government would rebuke some of our shoddy contractors occasionally, it might work much good. Well, in the Hellespont we saw where Alexander and Lord Byron swam across, the one to see her upon whom his soul's affections were fixed with a devotion that only death could impair, and the other merely for a flyer, as you may say. We had two noted tombs about us, too. On one shore slept Ajax, and on the other Hecuba.

We had water batteries and forts on both sides of the Hellespont, and the crimson flag of Turkey, with its white crescent, and occasionally a village, and sometimes a train of camels; we had all these to look at till we entered the broad sea of Marmora, and then the land soon fading from view, we resumed euchre and seven-up once more.

### Constantinople.

We dropped anchor in the mouth of the Golden Horn early in the morning. This is a narrow arm of the sea which branches from the Bosphorus (a sort of broad river which connects the Marmora and Black Seas) and, curving around, divides the city in the middle. Galata and Pera are on one side of the Bosphorus, and the Golden Horn; Stamboul (ancient Byzantium) is upon the other. On the other bank of the Bosphorus is Scutari and other suburbs of Constantinople. This great city contains a million inhabitants, but so narrow are its streets, and so crowded together are its houses, that it does not cover much more than half as much ground as New York City. Seen from the anchorage or from a mile or so up the Bosphorus, it is by far the handsomest city we have seen. Its dense array of houses swells upward from the water's edge, and spreads over the domes of many hills; and the gardens that peep out here and there, the great globes of the mosque, and the countless minarets that meet the eye everywhere, invest the metropolis with the quaint Oriental aspect that one dreams of when he reads books of eastern travel. Constantinople makes a noble picture.

But its attractiveness begins and ends with its picturesqueness. From the time you start ashore till you get back again, you damn it. The boat you go in is admirably miscalculated for the service it is built for. It is handsome and neatly fitted up, but no man could handle it in the turbulent currents that sweep down the Bosphorus from the Black Sea, and few men could row it satisfactorily even in still water. It is a long, light canoe (calque), large at one end and tapering to a knife-blade at the other. They make that long sharp end the bow, and you can imagine how these boiling currents spin it about. It has two oars, and sometimes four, and no rudder. You start to go to a given point and you run in fifty different directions before you get there. First one oar is backing water, and then the other; it is seldom that both are going ahead at once. This kind of boating is calculated to drive a nervous man crazy in a week. The boatmen are the awkwardest, the stupidest, and the most unscientific on earth, I think.

### The Fashions.

Ashore, it was—well, it was an eternal circus. People were thicker than bees, in those narrow, crowded streets, and the men were dressed in all the outrageous, outlandish, idolatrous, extravagant, infernal costumes that ever a tailor with the delirium tremens and seven devils could conceive of. There was no freak in dress too crazy to be indulged in; no absurdity too absurd to be tolerated; no frenzy in ragged diabolism too fantastic to be attempted. No two men were dressed alike. It was a wild masquerade of all imaginable costumes—every struggling throng in every street was a dissolving view of stunning contrasts. Some patriarchs wore awful turbans, but the grand mass of the infidel horde wore the skull-cap they call a fez. All the remainder of the raiment they indulged in was utterly indescribable.

### Street Life.

The shops here are mere coops, mere boxes, bath-rooms, closets—anything you please to call them—on the first floor. The Turks sit cross-legged in them, and work and trade and smoke long pipes, and smell like a slaughter-house in summer. Crowding the narrow street in front of them are beggars, who beg sternly yet never collect anything; and wonderful cripples, distorted out of all semblance of humanity, almost; vagabonds driving laden asses; porters carrying dry-goods boxes as big as cottages on their backs; pedlars of grapes, hot corn, pumpkin seeds, and a hundred other things, yelling like fiends; and sleeping placidly among the hurrying feet are the famed dogs of Constantinople; drifting noiselessly about are squads of Turkish women, draped from chin to feet in flowing robes, and with snowy veils bound about their heads, that disclose only the eyes and a vague, shadowy notion of their features. Seen moving about, far away in the dim, arched aisles of the Great Bazaar, they look as the shrouded dead must have looked when they walked forth from their graves amid the storms and thunders and earthquakes that burst upon Calvary that awful night of the Crucifixion. A street in Constantinople is a picture which one ought to see once—not oftener.

And then there was the goose-rancher—a fellow who drove a hundred geese before him about the city, and tried to sell them. He had a pole ten feet long, with a crook in the end of it, and occasionally a goose would branch out from the flock and make a lively break around a corner, with wings half lifted and neck stretched to its utmost. Did the goose-merchant get excited? No. He took his pole and reached after that goose with unspeakable sang froid—took a hitch round his neck, and yanked him back to his place in the flock without an effort. He steered his geese with that stick as comfortably as another man would steer a yawl. A few hours afterward we saw him sitting on a stone at a corner, in the midst of the turmoil, sound asleep in the sun, with his geese squatting around him, or dodging out of the way of asses and men. We came by again, within the hour, and he was taking account of stock, to see whether any of his flock had strayed or been stolen. The way he did it was unique. He put the end of his stick within six or eight inches of a stone wall, and made the geese march in single file between it and the wall. He counted them as they went by. There was no shirking that arrangement.

MARK TWAIN.