

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

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Relics of Sacred History—Singular Mine— Geological and Ethnological Speculations —Do Oysters Climb Hills?—Smyrniote Millerites—An Asiatic Railway.

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Smyrna's Lions.

EDITORS ALTA: We inquired, and learned that the lions of Smyrna consisted of the ruins of the ancient citadel, whose broken and prodigious battlements frown upon the city from a lofty hill just in the edge of the town—the Mount Pagus of scripture, they call it; the site of that one of the Seven apocalyptic Churches of Asia which was located here in the first century of the Christian era; and the grave and the place of martyrdom of the venerable Polycarp, who suffered in Smyrna for his religion some eighteen hundred years ago.

We took little donkeys and started. Polycarp did not amount to anything save in its character as a holy place and one around which cluster the traditions and associations of a hoary antiquity. I know nothing about Polycarp, except that he served his Lord for three-score and six years and then was thrown to the wild beasts because he refused to forswear his allegiance.

The "Seven Churches"—thus they abbreviate it—were jolly enough. We rode there—about a mile and a half in the sweltering sun—and visited a little Greek church which they said was built upon the ancient site; and we paid a small fee, and the holy attendant gave each of us a little wax candle as a remembrance of the place, and I put mine in my hat and the sun melted it and the grease all ran down the back of my neck; and so now I have not got anything left but the wick, and it is a sorry and a wilted-looking wick at that.

I argued with all my might that the "church" mentioned in the Bible meant a party of Christians, and not a building; that the Bible spoke of them as being very poor—so poor, I thought, and so subject to persecution (as per Polycarp's martyrdom) that in the first place they probably could not have afforded a church edifice, and in the second wouldn't have dared to build it in the open light of day if they could; and finally, that if they had had the privilege of building it, common judgment would have suggested that they build it somewhere near the town. But they ruled me down and scouted my evidences. However, retribution came to them afterward. They found that they had been led astray and had gone to the wrong place; they discovered that the accepted site is in the city.

Riding through the town, we could see marks of the six Smyrnas that have existed here and been burned up by fire or knocked down by earthquakes. The hills and the rocks are rent asunder in places, excavations expose great blocks of building-stone that have lain buried for ages, and all the mean houses and walls of modern Smyrna along the way are spotted white with broken pillars, capitals and fragments of sculptured marble that once adorned the lordly palaces that were the glory of the city in the olden time.

Mysterious Oyster Mine.

The ascent of the hill of the citadel is very steep, and we proceeded rather slowly. But there were matters of interest about us. In one place, five hundred feet above the sea, the perpendicular bank on the upper side of the road was ten or fifteen feet high, and exposed three veins of oyster shells, just as you have seen quartz veins exposed in the cutting of a road in California. The veins were about eighteen inches thick and two or three feet apart, and they slanted along downward for a distance of thirty feet or more, and then disappeared where the cut joined the road. Heaven only knows how far a man might trace them by "stripping." They were clean, nice oyster-shells, large, and just like any other oyster-shells. They were thickly massed together, and none were scattered above or below the veins. Each one was a well-defined lead by itself, and without a spur. My first instinct was to set up the usual—

"NOTICE!

"We, the undersigned, claim five claims of two hundred feet each, (and one for discovery,) on this ledge or lode of oyster-shells, with all its dips, spurs, angles and sinuosities, and fifty feet on each side of the same, to work it, etc., etc., according to the mining laws of Smyrna."

They were such perfectly natural-looking leads that I could hardly keep from taking them up. Among the oyster-shells were mixed many fragments of ancient, broken crockeryware. Now how did those masses of oyster-shells get there? I cannot figure it out. Broken crockery and oyster-shells are suggestive of restaurants—but then they could have had no such places away up there on that mountain side in our time, because nobody has lived up there. A restaurant would not pay in such a stony, forbidding, desolated place. And, besides, there wasn't any champagne corks among the shells. If there ever was a restaurant there, it must have been in Smyrna's palmy days, when the hills were covered with houses. I could stand one restaurant, on those terms; but then how about the three? Did they have restaurants there at three different periods of the world?—because there are two or three feet of solid earth between the oyster leads. Evidently, the restaurant solution won't answer.

The hill might have been the bottom of the sea, once, and got lifted up, with its oyster-beds, by an earthquake—but, then, how about the crockery? And, moreover, how about *three* oyster-beds, one above another, and thick strata of good, honest earth between?

That theory will not do. It is just possible that this hill is Mount Ararat, and that Noah's Ark rested here, and he ate oysters and threw the shells overboard. But that will not do, either. There are the three layers again and the solid earth between—and, besides, there were only eight in Noah's family, and they could not have eaten all these oysters in the two or three months they staid on top of that mountain. The beasts—however, it is simply absurd to suppose he didn't know any more than to feed the beasts on oyster suppers. He couldn't afford it, anyhow. He had been out eleven months, and they must all have been on short rations for some time.

It is painful—it is even humiliating—but I am reduced at last to one slender theory: that the oysters climbed up there of their own accord. But what object could they have had in view?—what did they want up there? What could any oyster want to climb a hill for? To climb a hill must necessarily be fatiguing and annoying exercise for an oyster. The most natural conclusion would be, that the oysters climbed up there to look at the scenery. Yet when you come to reflect upon the nature of an oyster, it seems plain that he does not care for scenery. An oyster has no taste for such things; he cares nothing for the beautiful. An oyster is of a retiring disposition and not boisterous—not even cheerful above the average, and never enterprising. But above all, an oyster does not take any interest in scenery—he scorns it. What have I arrived at, now? Simply at the point I started from—namely: those oyster shells are there, in regular layers, five hundred feet above the sea, and no man knows how they got there. I have hunted up the guide-books, and the gist of what they say is this: "They are there, but how they got there is a mystery."

Millerism.

Twenty-five years ago, a multitude of lunatics in America put on their ascension shirts, took a tearful leave of their friends, and got ready to fly up into heaven at the first toot of the trumpet. But the angel did not blow it. Miller's resurrection day failed to come to time. The Millerites were a disgusted community. I did not suspect that there were Millers in Asia, but a gentleman tells me that they had it all set for the world to come to an end one day about three years ago. There was much buzzing and preparation for a long time previously, and it culminated in a wild excitement at the appointed time. A vast number of the populace ascended this citadel hill early in the morning, to get out of the way of the general destruction, and many of the infatuated closed up their shops and retired from all earthly business. But the strange part of it was that about three in the afternoon, while this gentleman and his friends were at dinner in the hotel, a terrific storm of rain, accompanied by thunder and lightning, broke forth and continued with dire fury for two or three hours. It was a thing unprecedented in Smyrna at that time of year, and scared some of the most skeptical. The streets ran rivers and the hotel floor was flooded with water. The dinner had to be suspended. When the storm finished and left everybody drenched through and through, and melancholy and half-drowned, the ascensionists came down from the mountain as dry as so many charity-sermons! They had been looking down upon the fearful storm going on below, and really believed that their proposed destruction of the world was proving a grand success.

The Smyrna R. R.

A railway here in Asia—in the dreamy realm of the Orient—in the fabled land of the Arabian Nights—is a funny thing to think of. And yet they have got one already, and are building another. The present one is well built and well conducted, by an English Company, but is not doing an immense amount of business. The first year it carried a good many passengers, but its freight list only comprised 800 pounds of figs!

It runs almost to the very gates of Ephesus—a town great in all ages of the world—a city familiar to readers of the Bible, and one which was as old as the hills when the disciples of Christ preached in its streets. It dates back to the shadowy ages of tradition, and was the birth-place of gods renowned in Grecian mythology. The idea of a locomotive tearing through such a place as this, and waking the phantoms of its old days of romance out of their dreams of dead and gone centuries, is curious enough. We journey thither to-morrow to see the celebrated ruins.

MARK TWAIN.