

THE HOLY LAND EXCURSION.

LETTER FROM "MARK TWAIN."

[SPECIAL TRAVELLING CORRESPONDENT OF THE ALTA.]

[Number Twenty-Eight.]

Tent Life in Syria—A Wonderful Horse—In Bible Land—Seeing Bible Pictures—Recollections of Joshua—The Tomb of Noah—Taxes and Taxation in the East—The Splendors of the Pilgrimage.

IN CAMP NEAR TEMNIN EL FOKA,)
VALLEY OF LEBANON, Sept. 12th. }

"Come Like Spirits, So Depart."

"The night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away."

I slept very soundly last night, yet when the dragoman's bell rang at half-past five this morning and the cry went abroad of "Ten minutes to dress for breakfast!" I heard both. It surprised me, because I have not heard the breakfast gong in the ship for a month, and whenever we have had occasion to fire a salute at daylight I have only found it out in the course of conversation afterward. However, camping out, even though it be in a gorgeous tent, makes one fresh and lively in the morning—especially if the air you are breathing is the cool, fresh air of the mountains.

I was dressed within the ten minutes, and came out. The saloon tent had been stripped of its sides, and had nothing left but its roof; so when we sat down to table we could look out over a noble panorama of mountain, sea and hazy valley. And sitting thus, the sun rose slowly up and suffused the picture with a world of rich coloring. Hot mutton chops, fried chicken, omelettes, fried potatoes and coffee—all excellent. This was the bill of fare. It was sauced with a savage appetite purchased by hard riding the day before, and refreshing sleep in a pure atmosphere. As I called for my second cup of coffee, I glanced over my shoulder, and behold our white village was gone—the splendid tents had vanished like magic! It was wonderful how quickly those Arabs had "folded their tents;" and it was wonderful, alas, how quickly they got the thousand odds and ends of the camp together and disappeared with them.

By half-past six we were under way, and all the Syrian world seemed to be under way also. The road was filled with mule trains and long processions of camels. This reminds me that I have been trying for some time to think what a camel looks like, and now I have made it out. When he is down on all his knees, flat on his breast to receive his load, he looks like a goose swimming; and when he is upright he looks like a bob-tailed ostrich with fore-legs to it. Camels are not beautiful, and their long under lip gives them an exceedingly "gallus" expression. They have immense, flat, forked cushions of feet, that make a track in the dust like a pie with a slice cut out of it. They are not particular about their diet. They would eat a tomb-stone if they could bite it. A thistle grows about here which has needles on it that would pierce through leather, I think; if one touches you, you can find relief in nothing but profanity. The camels eat these. They show by their actions that they enjoy them. I expect it would be a real treat to a camel to have a keg of nails for supper.

"Jerico."

While I am speaking of animals, I will mention that I have got a horse by the name of "Jerico." He is a mare. I have seen remarkable horses before, but none so remarkable as this. I wanted a horse that could shy, and this one fills the bill. I had an idea that shying indicated spirit. If I was correct, I have got the most spirited horse on earth. He shies at everything he comes across, with the utmost impartiality. He appears to have a mortal dread of telegraph poles, especially; and it is fortunate that these are on both sides of the road, because as it is now, I never fall off twice on the same side. If I fell on the same side always, it would get to be monotonous after a while. This creature has got scared at everything he has seen to-day, except a hay wagon. He walked up to that with an intrepidity and recklessness that were astonishing. And it would fill any one with admiration to see how he preserves his self-possession in the presence of a barley sack. This dare-devil bravery will be the death of this horse some day.

He is not particularly fast, but I think he will get me through the Holy Land. He has only one fault. His tail has been chopped off or driven up, and he has to fight the flies with his heels. This is all very well, but when he tries to kick a fly off the top of his head with his hind foot, it is too much variety. He is going to get himself into trouble that way, some day. He reaches around and bites my legs, too. I don't care particularly about that, only I don't like to see a horse too sociable.

I think the owner of this prize had a wrong opinion about him. He had an idea that he was one of those fiery, untamed steeds, but he is not of that character. I know the Arab has this idea, because when he brought the horse to me for inspection in Beirut, he kept jerking at the bridle and shouting in Arabic, "Hof will you? Do you want to run away, you ferocious beast, and break your neck?" when all the time the horse was not doing anything in the world, and only looked like he wanted to lean up against something and think. Whenever he is not shying at things, or reaching after a fly, he wants to do that yet. How it would surprise his owner to know this.

Bible Land.

We have been in a historical section of country all day. At noon we camped three hours and took luncheon at Mekzeh, near the junction of the Lebanon Mountains and the Jebel el Kuneiyseh, and looked down into the immense, level, garden-like Valley of Lebanon. To-night we are camping near the same valley, and have a very long sweep of it in view. We can see the long, whale-backed ridge of Mount Hermon projecting above the eastern hills. The "dews of Hermon" are falling upon us now, and the tents are almost soaked with them.

Over the way from us, and higher up the valley, we can discern, through the glasses, the faint outlines of the wonderful ruins of the Baalbec, the Baal-Gad of Scripture. Joshua, and another gentleman, whose name has escaped me, were the two spies who were sent into this land of Caanan from Egypt to report upon its character—I mean they were the spies who reported favorably—which report was received, and the committee discharged. They took back with them some specimens of the grapes of this country, and in the children's picture-books they are always represented as bearing one monstrous bunch swung to a pole between them, a respectable load for a pack-train. The Sunday school books stretched it a little. The grapes are most excellent to this day, but the bunches are not as large as those in the pictures. I was surprised and hurt when I saw them, because those colossal bunches of grapes was one of my most cherished juvenile traditions.

Well, Joshua reported favorably, and the children of Israel started out, with Moses at the head of the general government, and Joshua in command of the army, of 600,000 fighting men. Of women and children and civilians there was a countless swarm. Of all that mighty host none but Joshua ever lived to set his foot in the Promised Land. They wandered forty years in the desert, and then old Moses, the gifted warrior, poet, statesman and philosopher, went up into Pisgah and met his mysterious fate. Where he was buried no man knows:

"* * * no man dug that sepulchre,

And no man saw it e'er—

For the Sons of God upturned the sod

And laid the dead man there!"

Then Joshua started on his terrible raid, and from Jericho clear to this Baal-Gad, over here, he swept the land like the Genius of Destruction. He slaughtered the people, laid waste their soil, and razed their cities to the ground. He wasted thirty-one Kings, also. One may call it that, though really it can hardly be called wasting them, because there were always plenty of Kings in those days, and to spare. At any rate, he closed out thirty-one Kings, and divided up their realms among his Israelites. He divided up this valley stretched out here before us, and so it was once Jewish territory. They have long since disappeared from it, however.

Down yonder, an hour's journey from here, we passed through an Arab village of stone dry-goods boxes (they look like that,) where old father Noah's tomb lies under lock and key. [Noah was the party who built the ark.] Over these old hills and valleys the ark that contained all that was left of a vanished world once floated.

Noah's tomb is built of stone, and is covered with a long stone building. Bucksheesh let us in. The building had to be long, because the grave of the honored old navigator is two hundred and ten feet long itself! It is only about four feet high, though. The proof that this is the genuine spot where Noah was buried can only be doubted by uncommonly incredulous people. The evidence is pretty straight. Shem, the son of Noah, was present at the burial, and showed the place to his descendants, who transmitted the knowledge to his descendants, and the lineal descendants of these introduced themselves to us to-day. It was pleasant to make the acquaintance of members of so respectable a family. It was a thing to be proud of. It was the next thing to being acquainted with Noah himself.

Noah's memorable voyage will a'ways possess a living interest for me, henceforward.

An Unfortunate People.

If ever an oppressed race existed, it is this one we see fettered around us under the inhuman tyranny of the Ottoman Empire. I wish Europe would let Russia tone Turkey down a little. The Syrians are very poor, and yet they are ground down by a system of taxation that would drive any other nation frantic. Last year their taxes were heavy enough, in all conscience—but this year they have been increased by the addition of taxes that were forgotten them in times of famine in former years. On top of this the Government has levied a tax of one-tenth of the whole proceeds of the land. This is only half the story. The Pacha of a Pachalia does not bother himself with appointing Tax Collectors. He figures up what all these taxes ought to amount to in a certain district. Then he farms the collection out. He calls the rich men together, the highest bidder gets the speculation, pays the Pacha on the spot, and then sells out to smaller fry, who sell in turn to a piratical horde of still smaller fry. These latter compel the peasant to bring his little trifle of grain to the village, at his own cost. It must be weighed, the various taxes set apart and the remainder returned to the producer. But the Collector delays this duty day after day, while the producer's family are perishing for bread; at last the poor wretch, who cannot but understand the game, says take a quarter—take half—take two-thirds, if you will, and let me go! It must be the most outrageous state of things in all the world.

These people are naturally good-hearted and intelligent, and with education and liberty, would be a happy and contented race. They often appeal to the stranger to know if the great world will not some day come to their relief and save them. The Sultan has been lavishing money like water in England and Paris, but his subjects are sweating for it now.

More Splendor.

This style of camping out bewilders me. We have got boot-jacks and a bath-tub, now, and yet all the mysteries the pack-mules carry are not revealed. Brown has come to believe, at last, that the dragoman has got Aladdin's lamp hidden about his person, and has ceased to be surprised at anything. He has gone out now to inquire if the dragoman has brought a piano along.

MARK TWAIN.